



The Disenchanted Self: Anthropological Notes on Existential Distress and Ontological Insecurity Among ex-Mormons in Utah

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Abstract This paper describes a pervasive form of psychological distress occurring among people undergoing a sudden and acute collapse of faith in the teachings of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (aka LDS, or Mormon Church). Drawing on 18 months of fieldwork in Utah, I trace the cultural–historical etiology of this unique form of psycho-existential trauma, focusing on ex-Mormons’ narratives of ‘world collapse’—in which the all-encompassing symbolic-existential framework of reality once provided by religion disintegrated once they lost faith in the Mormon Church. Although marked by symptoms resembling depression, anxiety, dissociation and paranoia, this condition is however unlike mental health disorders described in psychiatric diagnostic manuals, and has thus been largely overlooked within the mental health professions. I thereby discuss the extent to which the distress of religious disenchantment constitutes a unique form of ‘cultural syndrome’ (Hinton and Lewis-Fernandez in *Cult Med Psychiatry* 34(2):209–218, 2010), reflective of complex historical, cultural, and religious transformations occurring within contemporary Utah Mormonism.

Keywords Mormonism · Psychiatry · Disenchantment · Loss of faith · Religious trauma · Psychosis

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Introduction

Former members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (aka Mormon or LDS Church) report experiencing acute psychological distress after undergoing a crisis of faith. Their disbelief in Mormonism's teachings often results in strained relations with friends and family, a loss of personal identity, debilitating bouts of loneliness and regret, and symptoms akin to clinically defined episodes of depression and anxiety (Ellison and Lee 2010; Galek et al. 2007; Krause et al. 1999). Yet traditional mental health counselling often fails to alleviate their distress. Focused primarily on interpersonal dynamics, cognitive thought patterns, or behavioral interventions for stress reduction, psychodynamic and cognitive-behavioral approaches tend to misattribute the underlying cause of ex-Mormons' symptoms, perpetuate counter-productive binaries between mind and body, and overlook the ontological, existential, and phenomenological dimensions of people's distress. Paradoxically, some feel re-traumatized when therapists—both Mormon and non-Mormon alike—offer misinformed advice, such as suggesting to talk about their faith crisis with former church bishops, church-related friends, and estranged family members. Unfortunately, mental health clinicians receive little to no training on the exigencies of religious disenchantment, as it is a complex psycho-religious phenomenon for which there is currently a dearth of clinically relevant, empirically descriptive, and theoretically informed analysis.

In this paper, I reflect on how the sudden collapse of a religiously informed conception of reality contributes to a unique form of ontological insecurity and existential distress among ex-Mormons. First, drawing on findings from an ethnographic study of religious disenchantment among former members of the LDS Church in Utah, I position this phenomenon within the literature on religion, mental health, and the psychological effects of what are termed “spiritual struggles” in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM). Second, I trace the cultural-historical etiology of this condition vis-a-vis Mormonism's contemporary “crisis of apostasy,” arguing for the importance of a cultural-epidemiology of disenchantment. Third, I describe how the collapse of ex-Mormons' former religious world manifests in psychosis-like experiences distinct from feelings of depression or anxiety. Here I present brief descriptions of (dis)embodiment, depersonalization, hyper-reflexivity, and the loss of self-affection among ex-Mormons. Finally, I conclude by pointing to how a better understanding of this condition potentially informs psychiatric diagnosis, treatment, and research about culturally specific forms of distress.

Background

Academic psychiatry has long suffered from intellectual blind spots and prejudices towards issues of religion and spirituality. Historically, having deep religious beliefs was thought to reflect some deeper psychopathology, a “universal obsessional neurosis” as Freud described it, while losing one's faith was thought to be a return

to sanity. For example, Albert Ellis, the founder of rational emotive (cognitive) therapy brazenly suggested that “The elegant therapeutic solution to emotional problems is quite unreligious....The less religious they [patients] are, the more emotionally healthy they will tend to be” (Ellis 1980:637). Recognizing the “occasional, devastating misdiagnosis; not infrequent mistreatment; ...[and] inadequate research and theory” (Peck 1993:243) to which this legacy has contributed, academic psychiatry has more recently reversed course and begun researching the salutary effects of religious activity (Ellison 1991; Pargament 1997; Smith, McCullough and Poll 2003), and incorporating culturally sensitive guidelines for assessing diverse forms of spirituality (e.g. having prophetic visions or belief in spirit possession) into the DSM (American Psychiatric Association 2000:685).

While these efforts have successfully promoted non-reductive and non-pathologizing approaches to treating religious believers’ mental health needs, a parallel form of postsecular bias has also emerged with its own intellectual prejudices and oversights. For example, the DSM’s outline for cultural formulation describes religion largely in positive terms, as a source of “emotional, instrumental and informational support” (p. 844) to be leveraged in therapy, and not—despite mounting evidence that so-called “spiritual struggles” undermine mental health—as a potential source of psychological distress (Exline 2002; Exline and Rose 2005; McConnell et al. 2006). Religious disenchantment has thus largely been overlooked as a distinct mental health issue requiring its own unique approach to diagnosis and treatment. It is therefore perhaps unsurprising that the academic literature contains scant empirical descriptions or theoretical analyses of this psycho-religious phenomenon (see Winell 2006 and Hovet 2016). Instead, what little writing does exist has been confined to popular monographs and informal conversations within “recovery from religious trauma” support group communities created by and for former members of fundamentalist religions.

Anthropological research on so-called cultural idioms of distress has also paradoxically contributed to this intellectual oversight. Historically treating culture as a more or less enduring, expressive and interpretive framework through which psychological stress manifests and/or is expressed, ethnographic studies of religion and mental health have primarily focused on psychical conditions characterized by some sense of normativity—i.e. “socially and culturally resonant means of experiencing and expressing distress in local worlds” (Nichter 2010:405, also see Obeyesekere 1984). Given this intellectual legacy, the distress of religious disenchantment has been easily overlooked. First, religious disenchantment lacks the very kinds of culturally normative, socially patterned expressions and behaviors that researchers can easily track and describe. Because of this, disenchantment is easily misrecognized/misidentified. Second, those undergoing a loss of religious faith rarely openly discuss their experiences for fear of being stigmatized and marginalized within their faith groups (Cragun and Hammer 2012). In many ways, this phenomenon has only recently become “visible” as internet-based support groups and recovery communities have provided a safe space for people to gather and discuss their experiences. And third, religious disenchantment exemplifies an acute form of culture collapse at the ontological level, in which the all-pervasive,

all-encompassing symbolic-existential framework undergirding everyday reality crumbles. For this reason, anthropologists, who are often more finely attuned to documenting and analyzing culture in its more self-evident, empirical manifestations, tend to avoid questions related to the abatement of culture and how culturalized subjects decouple themselves from intimately inhabited frameworks of meaning.

Despite these disciplinary oversights, recent shifts in global religiosity compel more sustained attempts to document the incidence, prevalence, and etiology of this psycho-religious phenomenon. Take for example PEW Research Center's 2014 Religious Landscape Study, which estimated that the number of "nonreligious" people in the U.S. had grown from 36.6 million to 55.8 million people (23% of the U.S. adult population), with the global rate of nonreligion just above 16% (Pew Research Center 2012). With such widespread religious disaffection afoot, researchers and clinicians alike must begin interrogating how rising rates of religious disaffection impact global nonbelievers' mental health (Fenelon and Danielsen 2016; Scheitle and Adamczyk 2010), and how religious disenchantment is experienced, perceived, and treated within communities most affected by these religious-secular tensions.

Disenchantment and World Collapse in Utah Mormonism

One challenge in analyzing this condition is to ethnographically assess whether, and to what extent, the psychological effects of religious disenchantment vary cross-culturally. I argue here that the distress of disenchantment indeed functions as what (Hinton and Lewis-Fernández 2010) might refer to as a "cultural syndrome," in that its associated symptoms can be seen as embodied expressions of conflicts circulating at the interpersonal and societal level within Mormon culture, and is therefore amenable to cross-cultural analysis. To make sense of this, we must briefly explore the socio-cultural dimensions of Mormonism's contemporary "crisis of apostasy" as it has unfolded in Utah, the cultural and religious epicenter of the LDS faith, before moving onto descriptions of how this cultural syndrome manifests among ex-Mormons.

Mormonism is often touted as one of the most rapidly growing world religions, with significant populations throughout the United States, including in Utah, Idaho, Nevada, and Arizona, as well as internationally, particularly in Central America, South America, and parts of Africa. Although globally widespread, Mormonism in Utah is extraordinarily unique. Settled in 1847 by Mormon pioneers escaping persecution back east, Utah became the nucleus around which Mormonism began its cultural, political, and religious domination of the intermountain region west of the Rockies (Sells and Berman 2005). It is now the only U.S. state with a single religious group making up the majority of its population, with over 60% of Utah's population claiming membership in the LDS Church (The Salt Lake Tribune 2014). Unsurprisingly, Mormonism's cultural dominance in the state is relatively absolute. In this area, dubbed by social geographers as the "Mormon Culture Region," most church members are "born in the faith," living in neighborhoods where they enjoy

near absolute ascendancy in religious, political, and social matters. As sociologists Ryan Cragun and Rick Phillips note, Utah Mormons “inhabit a place where the tenets of Mormonism are axiomatic and an LDS identity is inculcated from birth” (2008:3).

Rooted in teachings about the “pre-existence,” where members believe they existed as “spirit children” alongside their “Heavenly Mother and Father,” Mormonism’s theological and doctrinal peculiarities envelope believers in what sociologist Peter Berger (1967) refers to as an all-encompassing “sacred canopy.” By participating in almost daily church activities, regularly engaging in “temple work,” observing dietary restrictions, wearing sacred “temple garments” under their clothing, and dutifully striving to create “eternal families” who will live together in the “celestial kingdom,” Mormonism’s unique religious beliefs and practices intricately cross sect members’ physical, temporal, and social planes of existence.

However, within such an all-encompassing faith, to “know the church is true” and then deny that knowledge is considered an unforgivable sin. People who do so are quickly branded “apostates,” rhetorically referred to as lost souls destined to spend eternity in “outer darkness,” and often shunned by family, friends, and neighbors due to widespread belief that apostasy stems from a personal decision to sin (Bromley 1998; Carter 1998; Mauss 1998).

Yet, so-called “ex-Mormons” did not choose to disbelieve, as commonly assumed. On the contrary, most of the ex-Mormons I spoke to had been “living the gospel” their whole lives—they were born, and planned to die, as Mormons. Ironically, their first steps out of the church were taken while seeking to deepen their faith in its teachings, not prove it wrong. While working to develop their “testimony” of the church’s “truth” through Mormon history and scripture study, they inadvertently revealed information about past teachings, people, and events that were irreconcilable with what is now depicted in official lesson materials and over the pulpit. As I discuss elsewhere (Brooks 2018), while faithful testimonies are ostensibly built upon members’ study and pondering of stories regarding Joseph Smith’s visionary encounter with God, his discovery and subsequent translation of golden plates into the Book of Mormon, and the contents of scripture itself, ex-Mormons claimed that their having “dug too deep” into that fabled past paradoxically effected a radical disenchantment of their once stalwart faith. As a middle-aged ex-Mormon woman once told me, “everyone says that if your testimony was ever actually real or as strong as it was supposed to be you never would have lost it. But that’s not right. We were doing everything we were taught, as much if not more than anybody else...It’s really the best of us who leave.”

As anthropologists and psychologists have long intimated, ontological security rests on the incorporation of a culturally manufactured and collectively held framework of reality. Maintaining a sense of psychological safety and sanity requires the ability to interpret and respond to the exigencies of one’s reality without questioning its solidity and validity. Yet, I found that in disenchantment ex-Mormons experienced debilitating distress as their physical, social, and symbolic surroundings lost their once comforting familiarity and were transfigured into something strange and unsettling. In the wake of such religious disenchantment, ex-

Mormons found that the entire system of meaning upon which their sense of self had been built, effectively collapsed. I heard people describe feeling like they were “floating,” that their “world literally shook” or felt to be “crumbling beneath my feet.” Others used language flushed with a sense of ontological estrangement, saying they felt it as if they were living in a dream where “nothing seems real.” While some intimated that they were instead “waking up from a dream” only to find that “the world I thought I had been living in was all make believe.” Common to each of these descriptions is an expression of an abrupt, unexpected, cataclysmic collapse of faith, and an emphasis on what is described in the literature on the phenomenology of psychosis as a disruption of “vital contact” with the world (Minkowski 1970, in Spiegelberg 1972).

Here I am inspired by psychiatrist R.D. Laing’s approach to understanding and treating symptoms of acute psychosis in people clinically diagnosed with schizophrenia. In his landmark work, *The Divided Self*, Laing suggested that the schizoid condition must be understood not in terms of clinical pathology (i.e. as an assortment of cognitive and/or affective symptoms diagnostically traced to the machinations of individual minds), but as a phenomenological rupture in the interstitial fabric tying people to a normative, intersubjectively shared reality. Only then will the experiential dimensions of psychosis and schizoid-type “disorders” be rendered understandable, he argued. In formulating his approach, Laing drew heavily on his philosophical forebearers. The Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard (1940), writing a century earlier, described how the very act of *being* requires a tacit awareness of our physical and symbolic surroundings, and more importantly, a continual act of *doing* situated within this ontologically significant framework of meaning. However, in the absence of such anchoring points (whether in schizophrenia or disenchantment), people can experience severe forms of what Kierkegaard referred to as “despair,” a fear of “nothingness,” or “meaninglessness.” That is, a disintegration of the self and a “dissolution of the existence of...personality” altogether (Goldstein 1940). In such cases of “existential anxiety” the experience is in fact not one of being afflicted by something that someone has, but rather, is characterized by an overwhelming sensation that one *is* the condition, in that one’s entire *being* is thrown into question (May 1977). It is in this vein that I approach how such conditions manifest in religious disenchantment.

Methods and Approach

To get at these issues, I present findings from ethnographic fieldwork conducted over 18-months in Utah between 2011 and 2013. I use data gleaned from participant observation, in-depth audio-recorded interviews, and informal conversations to describe and analyze this issue of religious disenchantment, ex-Mormons’ experiences leaving their faith, and their attempts, in the words of one ex-Mormon man, to “recover from religion.”

When I began ethnographic research in late 2011, the issue of Mormon apostasy was just emerging in public discourse. In an uncharacteristically open admission from a senior church leader, the official historian of the LDS church admitted to a

roomful of university students that “we’ve never had a period of... apostasy like we’re having now.” While a host of news articles, books, and blog postings had long reflected this public admission of a hitherto shrouded matter (Beck 2006; Joffe-Walt 2005; Lavery and Di Milia 2009), historically, would-be Mormon apostates kept their doubts silent, fearful of Church teachings that suggest doubters, skeptics, and “faith killers...are to be shunned” (Asay 1981, p. 67). In the past decade, however, various highly visible, organized, and active ex-Mormon groups have emerged throughout Utah and around the U.S. These groups consist of a vast social network of thousands of members that collaboratively attend to the psycho-social needs of former Mormons through online podcasts, listservs, ex-Mormon conferences, and informal support group meetings for people “transitioning out of Mormonism”. Through such activities, ex-Mormons have thus actively reshaped the meaning of apostasy in the LDS Church. Providing a community of support for members gone astray, they help people understand and navigate the psychological and emotional distress of religious disenchantment.

This article presents data collected through my participation in these informal support group meetings, where upwards of thirty people would gather to discuss the hardships of leaving the church and the psychological and emotional toll of losing their faith. Through semi-structured interviews with roughly two dozen men and women of varying ages, I collected what ex-Mormons in Utah often refer to as “apostimonies,” a vernacular form of personal narrative describing people’s reasons for and experiences of leaving Mormonism. Marked by tearful renditions of personal despair, confusion, anger, and resentment, I found these narratives to be a key site through which ex-Mormons discursively reflected upon and negotiated the psychological turmoil of losing their faith. In this way, I was able to learn about people’s personal histories, including their former life in the church, existential concerns over the meaning of life and death, and their current views on spirituality and religion.¹

Sexually (Dis)embodying the Spirit

For the ex-Mormons I talked to, life in the church had been all-encompassing—their entire sense of self and identity articulated vis a vis their church membership. In daily living, they strove to fill themselves with the Lord’s divine presence, to “choose the right” in all actions, and to imbue within themselves a permanent disposition toward “righteous living.” In particular, they learned to attune themselves to the “promptings of the spirit,” to treat their physical bodies as sacred temples, and to devote all of their worldly and sexual labors to building a “celestial family.”

¹ While this article describes the traumatic existential crisis that can accompany a sudden loss of faith, not all ex-Mormons I spoke with experienced such forms of psychological turmoil. In general, those who were born and raised in Mormonism, as opposed to those who converted, seemed more likely to have such experiences. That being said, there were also lifelong church members who grew disenchanting, yet did not report any acute or debilitating distress. Efforts to identify how and why such experiences vary, and how they are distributed across communities, are now needed.

While matters of religious doctrine and theology could be intellectually debated and jettisoned after leaving Mormonism, ex-Mormons said they still *felt* Mormon at times. Mormonism “gets into you,” they exclaimed. A lifetime of ritual practice in fact seemed to have created a disturbing sense of being haunted by vague embodied memories that reemerged from time to time—inhibitions, anxiousness, or fear—as they felt the church surreptitiously reassert its control over them. They complained of lasting sexual deficiencies, frequent fluctuations between emotional panic and detachment, and occasionally being lulled into experiencing unwelcome sensations of “feeling the spirit.” Even long after ex-Mormons thought they “were over it,” the banal routines of daily life often served as a catalyst for the untoward return of ostensibly forgotten memories of what it was like to *be* Mormon, even if the beliefs and practices of Mormon life were gone. The intractability of these embodied memories, their continued presence despite the absence of belief, unnerved the ex-Mormons I spoke to. It’s a traumatic experience, they told me, not only because of all that was lost in their departure from the church, but also because of everything that still hung on and refused to go away. As one man told me, “You’re driving in your car, and you hear a song on the radio, or you go someplace you haven’t been to in a while, and a memory or a feeling will pop up... it might make you feel guilty for leaving, sad, or lonely, and you say, ‘Whoa, I didn’t realize that was still there.’”

The philosopher Henri Bergson, believing that our whole past exists within us in latent form, taught that physical sensation, embodied practice, and memory are inextricably intertwined. Similarly, in their early work with “hysterics,” Freud and Breuer (1895) found that the affective force of psychical trauma—“fright, anxiety, shame or physical pain”—stemmed from unwelcome, unconscious memories burrowing into the depths of the psyche. The traumatic experience, whether originating from a singular event or a chronic condition, lodged itself into the unconscious mind and “[acted] like a foreign body,” which long after the fact continued to function as an autonomous “agent that is still at work.” Trauma, in this vein, came to be thought of as a disease of embodied memory.

It seems for ex-Mormons that the church’s persistent ability to inhabit their daily lives, long after recanting their beliefs, registered as a persistent form of psychosomatic trauma in their post-Mormon lives. This was particularly virulent in issues of sexuality where ex-Mormons contended with a lifetime of pressure to “build eternal families” and admonitions to protect oneself from sexual temptations. Ex-Mormon women seemed particularly afflicted by this lasting form of sexual-spiritual embodiment. Although this issue echoed throughout my interviews, once while attending an ex-Mormon support group meeting I witnessed a woman I call Sara poignantly describe this experience. Gesturing with an open palm over her midriff and breasts, Sara explained how her body had changed after giving birth to three children within the first 4 years of her marriage. “I lost my body to the church,” she declared. “I wasn’t always like this.” Before marriage and children, she had been proud of her physique—young, firm, and fit with a trim waistline and “perky breasts.” However, now she said she felt sunken, heavy, and unattractive. It was not that she did not want or love her children dearly. “They’re everything to me,” she stated. But the choice to have as many as she did, and when she did, felt like it had not been hers. “I never got a chance to just be young and beautiful,” she

lamented. Other women in the group sympathized with her. Each had her own story of loss, her own embodied memories of sacrificing her figure and sexuality to the church.

"I lost my body to the church" indeed became a common refrain among many of the ex-Mormon women I encountered. Inevitably, talk of loss was paired with descriptions of lives spent in the church in which they felt "trapped" in their bodies—"locked behind the bars of patriarchy," as another woman put it—constrained by frumpy clothing, a demeaning self-image, and teachings that slotted them solely as childbearing mothers attached to priesthood-holding men. Most importantly, though, loss was a language of the enduring and ambivalent absence of self in their post-Mormon lives, brought about by the church's continued constraining and controlling presence. Although they could begin wearing more flattering clothing, they said, it was not as easy to ignore the stretch marks and drooping breasts that are immutably etched into their flesh, constant reminders of a body transfigured in service to the church. For those like Sara, the body became a potent mnemonic device that stubbornly reminded her of what was lost (in the form of a youthful buoyancy) and what was gained (in the form of wrinkles and stretch marks) during her life in the church. She now found that even mundane practices such as looking in the mirror, provoked anger, sadness, and memories of a life lost. "Every day I can literally see what the church did to me!"

However, these mnemonic triggers were not isolated to the presence of visible markers on the body. They also registered as an unshakeable awareness of absence and deficiency. Because the values and beliefs that tacitly inform habits are entrenched in people's modes of conduct with themselves and with each other, they may continue long after the rationale supporting them has been forgotten (Csordas 1994). For ex-Mormon women, loss was a polysemic metaphor that pointed to feelings of not knowing how their sexual bodies worked, of realizing that for decades they had been unable to use their bodies as they wished and had been trained to look at them as an enduring source of sin, not pleasure. Ex-Mormon women described lifetimes of "not knowing" their bodies, feeling unable, or unwilling, to fully explore their pleasure potential. For another woman named Patti, this registered as a continued lack of control and ownership, a colonization of self that scared her away, even now, from exploring what was ostensibly "hers." "The church did a good job of drilling into me the idea that even thinking sexual thoughts was a sin. Touching myself was a sin, talking about sex was a sin. I got lessons regularly about chastity and staying pure and protecting my temple. Even though it was my body, I had no control over it. It's sad, but I know so many women who never knew they could achieve an orgasm before they left the church. It took me over a year before I was comfortable enough to have one myself."

Among ex-Mormons, a prominent, lingering form of this was also talked about in terms of having "God in the bedroom." Despite rejecting the church's teachings, ex-Mormons often found that God may have left their day-to-day thoughts but had somehow stayed between the sheets, appearing and reappearing during their most intimate moments. For example, John and Lana could talk about sex easily and openly with me and each other, but they were unable to put that talk into action. Over drinks at their house one evening, Lana described what it meant to have "God

in the bedroom.” “Sometimes when we try something new, I literally get nauseous. I don’t know what it is... I try to talk myself out of it, but it’s always there. We’ll talk about trying something new, but when it comes to it, I always end up crying.” The physical act of sex, especially John’s attempts to “try something new,” made her question whether leaving the church was the right thing to do, the affective power of guilt for using her body “inappropriately” in these moments of sensuality drawing her back into what she described as “a Mormon mind-set.” “I can go into the room feeling one way, but as soon as we start going, something changes and I’m sucked right back into it.”

An understanding of ex-Mormons’ religious disaffection is therefore incomplete if all that is taken into consideration is their rejection of particular ideas and beliefs associated with the institutional church or its formal doctrine. Even after rejecting the church’s teachings, Mormonism’s presence in some ways lingers on in the form of a persistent, tacit embodied ontology that divides one’s sense of self between a polluting body and a sacred spirit and creates an aversion to sex in its libidinous forms and a leeriness of the bodily pleasures sexual activity may produce. This inhibition no longer takes the form of an explicit ideology but a tacit colonization of the coterminous mind/body subject. As Katie Stewart writes, the body is not “incorporated into the self as inert substance or bodily ‘self-image’” but rather manages to “retain an affecting agency all its own” (1996, 132). Ex-Mormons know this “affective agency” all too well, as the body persistently reemerges as a problem amidst their disenchantment. The embodied habits, dispositions, ways of feeling and moving, and internal divisions and external boundaries have all been crafted and disciplined through years of envelopment in church activities, families, and doctrinal teachings, resulting in a persistent “interpellation” of self as “Mormon” (Althusser 1971).

Stuck Between Immanence and Estrangement

As ex-Mormons’ adherence to their former belief-system faded, a world once infused with celestial meaning seemed to slip into a harsh, pitiless materiality—disturbingly alien, disquieting, and unforgiving. Jacob, a young unwed ex-Mormon man whose recent graduation from college coincided with his loss of faith, once presciently described what it was like to lose a sense of metaphysical attunement to the world. “Before, anywhere I’d go I was reminded of Heavenly Father. The trees, the mountains, the rivers, all of it gave me peace and comfort because it was as if it had all been put there for me.” However, in disenchantment the aura of spiritual significance and sparkle of divine transcendence once overlaid upon the base material world was replaced by a listless, pallid world devoid of transcendent possibility. “I mean, everything still looks the same, but now it all just feels kind of dull and dead.” In a later conversation Jacob described how “In the church you feel like the whole universe is on your side. Like everything fits together and is somehow looking out for you.” However, on a recent rock-climbing trip he found himself suddenly acutely aware of this shift in perspective while hanging above the earth grasping bare rock. “I got scared. And I never get scared climbing, I’m usually

just in a zone. And when you get scared, you have problems. It was like I knew that I could get hurt, like that was a real possibility now. It's weird to say, but I realized that the rock wouldn't care if I slipped and fell."

After having jettisoned their Mormon worldview, I found that many ex-Mormons attempted to supplement this loss by reading across a broad range of scientific subjects, including human cognition, biological evolution, and astrophysics. This was, I think, an attempt to moor themselves in a secular-scientific epistemology that could address their now painfully unsettled questions concerning life, death, and humanity's place in the universe. Yet, seeking answers to such existentially and morally complex issues through such positivist explanatory frameworks at times seemed to exacerbate their sense of existential angst. Once when I asked Jacob what he missed most about being Mormon, he complained that "now there's no more mystery." Before his disenchantment, Jacob held an unwavering faith in the so-called "plan of happiness" through which dutiful obedience to the church's teachings would usher him through a successful mortal existence and on to an exalted afterlife in the Celestial Kingdom. "Now I know this is it. This is all we've got," he muttered to me dejectedly, "and I think in some ways there's something sad about that, you know, no mystery."

Ex-Mormons like Jacob indeed face a host of new questions about the ultimate meaning of life. But by seeking to transcend his former religious life through science Jacob unwittingly enmeshed himself in a plane of inescapable immanence. In the church, Jacob went on to explain, "if there's something that doesn't make sense, you always have this hope and confidence that you'll understand it someday. Like if you just hang on long enough and trust Heavenly Father, any question you have will be answered." The possibility of one day attaining transcendent knowledge, wisdom, or insight gave him an everlasting sense of hope and confidence to persevere through even the toughest times. However, questions about human existence that once were irrelevant within the framework of Mormon cosmology were now mortally unnerving.

I learned about evolution in school. That was one thing, I always knew about this other stuff that was out there. But I never really gave it much thought. I never had to think about what it meant to think that we might have evolved from apes or whatever. Now it's like, if we're just like apes, just like any other animals, then really nothing makes us any better or different. If that's the case, we're really not that special, we just do a good job of telling ourselves that. We're just basically animals who eat, shit and die like everything else.

While the Mormon church teaches that death simply marks the passage from one state of existence to the next, that the very materiality of our bodies will be reconstituted in perfect form in the celestial kingdom, Jacob's experience reflects an unsettling ontological transition from divine exceptionalism to organic relativism. Indeed, the impermanence of the body seemed to provoke in many people I spoke to a traumatic estrangement from self. Trapped within bodies hurtling headlong into inevitable decay, they now felt haunted by a dimension of human frailty that was inescapable and absolute. Simply put, in disenchantment ex-Mormons came face to face with their fragile mortality; their finite, inescapably immanent existence. And

so, untampered by Mormonism's teachings about eternal life, the awareness of death's inevitability and finality proved singularly unnerving. For instance, I once watched Jacob, amidst a conversation about life, death, and his experience of losing the afterlife, use his fingertip to gently trace the contours of the bones, tendons, and veins running down the back of his hands, observing his flesh as something foreign and fragile that will, as he muttered, someday "just rot away."

This form of ontological-existential estrangement affects ex-Mormons' intersubjective realities as well. For example, Jacob often described his interpersonal interactions as ephemeral and uncanny. People with whom he was once intimately familiar—friends, family, spouses, parents—no longer seemed *real* as they had before. While in the church family unity had been paramount, with weekly "family home evening" sessions providing opportunities for families to pray, read scripture and sing hymns together, thereby intertwining their intersubjective realities closely together through communal religious practice that taught "families are forever." However, in disenchantment, that once deeply felt familiarity and sense of common orientation and substance eroded. For instance, Jacob once described the relationship with his father in starkly depersonalized terms.

I look at my dad and I'm just sad. Here was this person who used to mean the world to me, and I guess he still does on some level, but I remember one time catching myself staring at him and feeling like I was looking at a stranger. Here I've known him my whole life, I mean, he's my dad, and all I can think is how distant I feel from him now. It was like I knew him but didn't know him at the same time.

Further on in the conversation, Jacob described an inability to communicate with his family anymore, a dissolution of familial bonds precipitated by his growing sense that they lacked a unique, vital essence.

We have nothing to say to each other. Their whole world revolves around the church, and that's all they talk about. It's like they're trapped in this other universe that only they know exists, and unless you speak the same language they do, and talk about things the same way as they do, you don't fit in. When I'm with them now all I hear is the church's indoctrination speaking through them.

Importantly, his relationship to them was no longer that of an *I* and *thou*, but rather an *I* and *it* (Buber 1971). They were, he asserted, entirely predictable in their thoughts and actions because they—like he, prior to his faith crisis—had been wholly conditioned by Mormonism. From Jacob's perspective they were in some sense manufactured reproductions or simulations of Mormonism's teachings, rendered non-existent in any *real* sense by virtue of their religious "programming."

Part of me feels like everyone around here is missing something, you know, that makes them fully human. They all look the same, dress the same, talk the same...Everyone thinks they're an individual. When you're in the church you think, 'oh, this person is really good at the piano, and this one likes to cook, how diverse we are!' But that's not really the case. Once you get out you see

it. We're all just little robots, trained to think and act the same way. We all have the same programming.

In these descriptions we see an indication that the world, in any authentically human sense, was rendered nonexistent amidst Jacob's disenchantment. Once populated by cherished loved ones, the world had now transmuted into a superficial "hyperreality" of mass-reproduced subjectivities, essentially hollow at the core, yet exhibiting the outward appearance of autonomous thought and feeling. The effects of this, for Jacob and others like him, can be quite alienating as the comfort once experienced while immersed in the collective familiar is upended. To transition from believer to non-believer thus at times means undergoing a traumatic shift in how one experiences what is "real." Indeed, to experience one's reality as a computational simulation is to strip it of its former luster of authenticity, and thereupon plunge the sensing self into a perpetual state of disequilibrium. "I sometimes feel like I'm living in a dream," Jacob told me. "Like all of this will go away and I'll wake up somewhere else. I don't know where really, but not here. It's like everything is real and not real at the same time."

Loss of Self-affection

Typical human experience oscillates between periods of engrossment in everyday behaviors, thoughts, and reactions, and periods of distanced self-reflexivity in which those same behaviors thoughts and reactions become the object of critical reflection. Religion is attractive not only for the comprehensive worldview it provides, but also, in part, because it provides believers ready-made responses to everyday situations so that such moments of self-reflexivity can be kept at a minimum, thus granting life a relative sense of ease or coherency. However, I found that for many ex-Mormons disenchantment perversely tips the balance typically struck between subjective experiences of immersion and reflection. As the usual taken-for-granted foundation of everyday assumptions and practices disappears, ex-Mormons often find themselves in a state of perpetual reflection and alienation from the self and the self-evident. In disenchantment, their innermost being becomes the object of intense scrutiny and deliberation as they experience a loss of what Anthony Giddens (1991) refers to as "living spontaneity," or a preconscious awareness of how to handle once routine behaviors, decisions, and interactions.

Jacob described it this way. "It gets really tiring to have to think about everything you did before just kind of naturally. It's like, you can't go on autopilot anymore." For example, Jacob felt unable to deal with everyday social interactions outside of the church. "This sounds bad, but I realized how much I suck at flirting. I mean, dating in the church was awkward as shit too. But at least I kind of know what to expect. You just make them think what a great priesthood holder you are, and bam, that's all it takes for half of them to be in love with you." Outside of the church, however, he found that the typical rules of dating in the church no longer applied. Instead, he became overly self-conscious and hesitant. During his last date he described becoming awkward and shy, second-guessing each "move" he made. "I

went on a date last week with this one girl I knew from college. She wasn't Mormon, so naturally I was stoked to see how things went with someone that hadn't grown up in the church. Then I realized how stupid I am about dating. The whole time I'm just worrying about what to do or not to do, you know. If I hold her hand, what will she think of me? Is that too forward? Or is she expecting something more and I'm just not getting the signals?"

While the logic of mainstream psychotherapy is founded upon the idea that discursive self-scrutiny will restore a lost sense of self, such that a patient becomes "aware" of the conditions of their existence and thereby gain some sense of control over them, ex-Mormons in the midst of disenchantment often seemed to become counterproductively "hyper-reflexive." These experiences of hyper-reflexivity lead to what has been referred to in the literature on schizophrenia and associated disorders as a loss of self-affection, or "ipseity," in which there is a loss of the sense of existing as a self-possessed subject of awareness or activity (Sass 1994). As Louis Sass has written regarding the psychopathology of psychosis, "[An attempt to] reassert control and reestablish a sense of self by means of introspective scrutiny may end up exacerbating feeling of self-alienation and fragmentation" (Sass 2001:254).

For ex-Mormons this can also manifest in the form of a temporal disruption in narratives of self, in which one's biographical continuity becomes fractured and broken into unarticulated discrete moments (Laing, 1965). In ex-Mormons' narratives this often took the form of a temporal disjuncture between "when I was in the church" and "since I left the church." For most ex-Mormons I spoke with "when I was in the church" denoted a time in which they were unconsciously caught up in religious enchantment, in which all of their thoughts and actions were shaped by the church. However, they at times seemed to disown that "person" as deluded, under the effects of "mind control," referring to life in the church as being "trapped in a cult." While such temporal divides allow for a disavowal of the former person, and in effect inaugurate the birth of a new, more self-aware and self-possessing form of personhood outside religion, it also sometimes unexpectedly triggers an awareness of the self as incongruent and internally divided, with a surreptitious capacity for self-delusion. Speaking at a support group meeting, one ex-Mormon woman said, "I don't really trust myself anymore." She insisted that if she could be "fooled" into believing in Mormonism in the first place, she was eternally susceptible to having it happen to her again. In such a mindset, self and other are rendered equally dangerous. Both forever threatening to colonize and command a mind henceforth unavailable to oneself as the self-possessing seat of consciousness.

While for some ex-Mormons unshackling the church's "mind control" over them brought feelings of mental and spiritual freedom, others often felt paralyzed by an uncontrollable vacillation between alternative frames of reference, points of view, and systems of meaning. One framed by Mormonism, the other by their burgeoning sense of secular rationality.

I lost my keys the other day and my immediate thought was to pray about it. I didn't. But then I had this really strong feeling like I should go outside and

look for them. And there they were, in the driveway, where I must have dropped them. And I thought, ok, that could be one of those things you say is a blessing, you know, like the spirit told me to go outside. But I also knew it could just be a coincidence, or an intuition, or whatever.

Such scenarios reflect a sense of existential liminality, of being somehow neither here nor there, stuck in-between two modes of reality that ex-Mormons found fundamentally irreconcilable. A sense of self-continuity was thus disturbed, and the singular, autonomous self that typically functions as the seat of awareness became fragmented under the weight of multiple, heterogeneous modes-of-being which seemed to intersect in, and bring about a division of, people's psyche. As Jacob once phrased it, "Sometimes I can't decide who is the real me, you know? How I really think about things. You can really drive yourself crazy trying to track it all down."

In response, many ex-Mormons intellectually dissected their lives, looking for remnants of Mormonism. Habits, hobbies, morals, and personalities were scrutinized for what was uniquely "theirs" and what was "implanted" there by the Church. For example, questions of morality had to be painstakingly reconceptualized outside of the moral horizons once provided by notions of sin and righteousness. Outside the Church, ex-Mormons found that the once stark contrast between right and wrong now appeared unnervingly blurred. "It sounds silly, but you really go through this process of thinking about everything you ever thought was right or whatever, and asking yourself, 'why do I think that?' Some stuff like not killing is easy, but most of it isn't so cut and dry...I really worried that I'd somehow become this horrible person without the church."

Yet such self-dissection risks inducing a rupture of one's psyche. To see the most intimate facets of one's being as products of cultural programming, open to critical analysis and deconstruction, but not entirely immersed in, is to effect a crippling sense of self-alienation. In the throes of disenchantment, Jacob said he had to "consciously remind" himself that there were still things he cared about, otherwise he found himself "slipping" into a state of apathetic distance from his everyday life. "I really didn't care about anything. My job, my friends, or my family. It was like nothing really mattered. I literally had to force myself to kind of just keep on with living, even if I didn't understand what that meant anymore."

Discussion

This article has sought to analyze some of the ways in which religious disenchantment manifests as a form of existential-ontological distress, with subjective disturbances resembling the fissures between self and world common in psychosis. As I argue, ex-Mormons' distress emerges from a unique experience of world collapse, a disintegration of the all-encompassing symbolic-existential framework of reality once provided by religion that induces psychosis-like experiences of (dis)embodiment, derealization, and loss of self-affection.

It is important to keep in mind that the distress I have described among ex-Mormons is not "culturally recognized," nor does it enjoy the status of being an

“indigenously diagnosed/divined cultural illness... recognized by practitioners” as typically discussed in studies of cultural idioms of distress (Nichter 2010). While a “religiosity gap” has long been documented between contemporary psychiatrists and their patients—the unfortunate consequence of a near complete lack of attention to religious issues in mental health training programs (Galanter 2005; Shafraanske and Maloney 1990)—recent efforts to instill “religious competence as cultural competence” seek to improve religious communities’ engagement and satisfaction with treatment (Whitley 2012). However, in places where religious disaffection, and its associated psychological tensions, are prevalent, the issue of “religious competence” begs whole new sets of questions. How do mental health clinicians operating in such religiously conflicted contexts go about “harnessing the individual’s moral resources and exploiting their social ecology” (Whitley 2012) in order to realize the values of patient-centered care (Berwick 2009)? How are the traumatic experiences associated with disenchantment, as described here, identified, focused on, and disentangled from other contributing factors, such as latent personality disorders, family conflict, and the possible presence of underlying depressive disorders? And finally, what role do mental health clinicians’ largely secular inclinations and perspectives play in interactions with patients for whom such matters are painfully unsettled?

Some critics indeed argue that academic psychiatry is misaligned with the exigencies of a continually secularizing world. Although instances of so-called “spiritual abuse” within New Religious Movements (aka “cults”) have received some clinical attention (Stone 2013; Ward 2011), the lack of research and training on disaffection from “mainstream” religions risks undermining the effectiveness of therapy. Discussing the need for cultural sensitivity in mental health treatment, Hinton and Lewis-Fernandez (2010) write, “If a clinician does not recognize complaints as culture-specific idioms (i.e., as opening up a complex network of meanings or, in other words, as revealing a hypersemiotized domain that links a complaint to multiple ontological zones), he or she may not attain a level of understanding of the patient’s lifeworld critical to valid diagnostic practice and consensual treatment negotiation” (Hinton and Lewis-Fernandez 2010:213). The same, indeed, could be said about the need for greater competency in matters of religious disenchantment. With guidelines that belie the traumatic experience of leaving more fundamentalist forms of religion, clinicians risk being grossly unprepared to appropriately treat former believers seeking help, thus contributing to new forms of misdiagnosis and perpetuating the lack of support for those leaving such all-encompassing faith traditions. Recognizing the secular bias within mainstream psychiatry, we must not only promote self-awareness among clinician’s regarding personal spiritual beliefs and attitudes to religiosity (Gartner 1996), but also their attitudes towards the struggles of leaving religion. Appropriately identifying and treating these issues obviously requires more research, the development of new treatment approaches, and improved training for therapists and health-care providers.

Some suspect that in severely diminishing the significance and authority of religion in everyday life, global secularization has tragically undermined our collective psychological well-being. Having informally diagnosed our “present

age” as having fallen into a spiritual malaise (Kierkegaard 1940) or as Charles Taylor (2007) terms it, an “immanent frame,” such critics argue that religious decline inevitably begets existential despair. Sociologists and social psychologists have similarly suggested that religiosity bestows various salutary effects on believers, such as social connectedness, emotional resiliency, and overall better mental and physical health (Fenelon and Danielsen 2016). In contrast, I hope to have shown here that, in the very least, the relationship between religion, secularization, and mental health is far more complex than often depicted. Disenchantment cannot be thought of as a linear progression from a religious to a secular mode of life, but instead unfolds as a recursive process of negotiating intimacy with and estrangement from religion, where it is often the embodied, vestigial *remains* of religious thought and practice that plague the non-believer, not their absence.

Indeed, the study of religious disenchantment reveals in succinct fashion the exigencies of “postsecular” living (Boeve 2005), in which the religious and the secular precariously commune in our everyday lives. My descriptions of the psychological trauma and existential duress experienced during religious disenchantment, while manifesting in unique ways within Mormon culture, are not isolated to this one faith tradition (Manning 2015; Zuckerman 2011). While this article is a study of apostasy and religious disaffection as it manifested in a particular time and place, this phenomenon is nevertheless reflective of more widespread transformations unfolding on the national and global religious landscape. With the historical and social drivers of religious disenchantment—including the advent of increasingly widespread and affordable information technology, an interconnected global citizenry, and science based knowledge—a host of other faiths, from southern Baptists and Catholics, to small spiritualist movements and Islamic communities face similar challenges (Baker and Smith 2015; Cottee 2015; Sherkat 2014; Zuckerman, Galen and Pasquale 2016). Rising rates of apostasy and disenchantment thus present a hitherto unseized opportunity for scholars to investigate modern secularization, not only as a process of socio-historical and institutional transformation, but a “social-psychological revolution” (Bellah 1970:66) unfolding in the intimate contours of people’s everyday lives. What’s needed now are more descriptive and comparative studies investigating the cross-cultural contexts in which distress associated with religious disenchantment arises, how various groups—including current and former members of faith traditions—interpret the polysemious experiences of disenchantment in diverse and often contradictory ways, and a better understanding of the micropolitics of articulating such distress in clinical and non-clinical settings.

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