

WHY I NEVER BECAME A MORMON...Part 1

Thirty Years in the Beehive State & Still a Heathen After All These Years.
Jim Stiles

For most of my adult life, I've lived in Utah. I discovered the canyon country when I was not much more than a kid and moved to Moab when I was old enough to escape the clutches of my family. I moved there for the scenery, which in some ways is a dumb reason to move anywhere. I stayed for more than 30 years and I left when I couldn't see the scenery for the tourists and, more importantly, the entrepreneurs and the promoters who brought them there. For me, the canyon country had become less about the magnificent landscape and all about the money that could be extracted from it.

Recently my wife and I re-located for part of the year to the Great Plains, to a tiny farm and ranch community with a population of about 600, and I realized how strange it felt to NOT be living in Mormon Country. As we settled into our new home, I noticed differences every day. I kept thinking--where was any mention of the LDS Church on the six o'clock news? What did President Monson say today? Where were the overheard grocery store conversations about 'Family Home Evenings' and who was going on a mission? Where, indeed, were the grocery stores that were closed on Sunday so that everybody could go to Sacrament meetings? And how was it possible that a grocery could sell anything stronger than 3.2 beer?

And from the much smaller but vocal anti-Mormon sector, where were the comments about "Mormon underwear" and the overflowing numbers of kids in LDS families? Or wisecracks about "elders" who were only 20 years old? Where were the Jell-O jokes? Or the reminders that Utah was like traveling in a time machine to the 1950s? I felt a strange hole in my life.

And yet, I am not a Mormon. I'm not even a Jack Mormon. True, when I was young, I thought about joining once, tempted by a pretty girl from Ogden who would have nothing to do with me if I didn't convert (I'll save that story for later). Over the next years and decades, as a Utah resident and a history buff, I learned a lot about the church's amazing story, and I admit some of it seems strange to me—from the Angel Moroni and urrim and thummim, to the gold plates on Hill Cumorah, to the testament of Oliver Cowdery, Martin Harris and David Whitmer...did I get those names right?..to the Miracle of the Gulls and Brigham's monumental "This is the right place" proclamation. I always felt connected to the Church and to the culture of the Mormon church, even if I wasn't a card-carrying member.



I've always had respect for any group of people who stayed true to their beliefs, even when I was unable to embrace their faith. In particular, I admired the courage of those Mormons in the early days who withstood the attacks and derision and persecution of their critics. It was a time that must have felt like the whole world was against them. It's no wonder the Latter Day Saints sought refuge in the remote deserts and mountains near the Great Salt Lake. As they made their way west from New York to Kirtland to Nauvoo and then across the continent to their desert stronghold at Deseret, I have always been in awe of a determination based so deeply in an unshakable faith.

Now, with a Mormon running as the Republican nominee for President, it's interesting to note the distance that the Church and its reputation have traveled since those hard days. Recently I was reading my copy of the San Juan Record and it was fitting for its most prolific contributor to talk about the long road the LDS Church has traveled. Buckley Jensen's article, "Exciting Time to be a Mormon," revealed the love and pride that he feels for his church. For Buckley's family, the commitment has spanned six generations. He talked about his great-great grandfather, his days as a missionary in England and he noted, "My greatest joy in life is living the eternal principles I was taught by my faith. That knowledge, in turn, has allowed me a firm grip on where I came

from, why I am here on earth, and where I am going...and helped immeasurably in raising my family."

As Buckley watched the convention play out on television and as it "extols the remarkable life of Mitt Romney and the church that he says, made him the man he is today," Buckley felt a shiver. "It is only going to get bigger, better and more intense."

But has the world or the country changed all that much? Have any of us?

Last spring, in the middle of the Republican primary season, Tonya and I drove over to a nearby town to visit an antique store. We weren't looking for anything specific but we rarely leave empty-handed. The owner is a wonderfully kind and gentle woman that we'd come to know a bit from our frequent visits. Anna is in her late 60s, born and raised on the prairie and as conservative as you'd expect from a midwesterner. She wears her Christianity on her sleeve, though not in a proselytizing way. When she

handed Tonya one of her business cards, the back of it read, "Jesus is the Way." And she meant it.

One day she asked us how long we'd been living on the Plains and we explained our move had been recent. "Tonya and I came here from Utah," I said and Anna's face darkened.

"Utah?" she asked warily, and she stared at the ground. The question just hung there awkwardly for a few seconds. I could see where she was going.

"We're not Mormons, if that's what you're thinking," I offered.

Her face lightened and she chuckled. "Well...THAT'S a relief. You all seem like such nice people and I just couldn't imagine you being one of them. What with all their polygamy and taking young girls and all the murders. It's just awful."

"Now wait a minute," I said, in the unexpected role of Mormon defender, "It's really not like that. Hardly anybody practices polygamy anymore and those that do have been excommunicated from the church. I think the Mormons banned polygamy in 1896....They're pretty much like any other Christian church, in many respects, at least."

"They're a CULT!" she insisted. "My minister says they are. I could never vote for that Romney. Who knows how many wives he really has. And what about those murders?"

She knew all about Warren Jeffs and Ervil LeBaron. She may have thought they were

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church leaders. "I think this whole Romney thing is so the Mormons can take over the country and we can't let that happen. They have to be stopped!"

"Well, anyway," I said finally, not wishing to engage in an all day debate, "you might want to read a bit more about the Mormons. They sure have their faults like anybody else and there's much I disagree with, but I really don't think Warren Jeffs is a fair representation of the Latter Day Saints. People like him represent the extreme element of Mormon culture. And I don't think they're looking for world domination."

Anna looked skeptical.

Later, Tonya and I talked about the conversation and the way people tend to look for the worst in each other. How we create hard beliefs based on nothing but rumor, innuendo and faulty information. People like Anna don't just accept the gossip, they embrace it. Why?

Then as we were almost home, as I pondered our chat with Anna, there was something about it that was so familiar. Something rang a bell and I knew where to look. When we got home, I picked through my recent editions of the San Juan Record and found another story by Buckley. It was called, "Religious Fanaticism that Defies Logic." It was a no-holds-barred condemnation of the religion of Islam.

Among Jensen's more strident points, Buckley claimed, "Emigrants from Muslim countries bring beliefs that they are incompatible with those of the Christian World.... The terrorist groups which circulate among those populations teach an ideology which results in terrorist acts that have cost the host countries billions of dollars trying to protect themselves."

Buckley went even further when he claimed, "There are several European countries that are rethinking their immigration policies. Some have decided that unless emigrants are willing to learn the language, dress like the native population and assimilate into the mainstream, they will not be welcome in the future. Australia does not allow immigration from the Muslim world, period. The Aussies are criticized for their stand on the issue, but most agree they will have fewer problems."

Buckley concluded, "It is infinitely more daunting and dangerous when we must deal with madmen and terrorists who think it is their duty to bring on Armageddon."

I re-read Buckley's essay and it occurred to me that if I changed a few words and names, his condemnation of Muslims was exactly what our friend Anna said about the Mormons. Anna, a good Baptist, saw Mormonism as incompatible with Christianity. Buckley saw the same dissonance in Islam.

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Buckley cited the "terrorism" that Islam spawns. Anna noted the murder and violence that she believed characterized Mormons.

Buckley noted that many countries were banning or attempting to ban Muslims from practicing their religions, demanding instead that they "assimilate into the mainstream." Wasn't that kind of intolerance and discrimination that drove the LDS church out of New York and Kirtland, Ohio? Isn't that one reason their temple in Nauvoo was burned to the ground? Wasn't it because of their failure to "assimilate?" A century and a half later, Anna could not imagine Mormons moving to her part of the world. "They would NOT be welcome here."

Buckley was sure Islam's agenda called for a Christian Armageddon. Anna was certain a Romney presidency would amount to a Mormon takeover of the United States.

We've already talked about the religious persecution that Mormons fled as they made their way across the continent. Many of those settlers who inhabited the vast expanses of the Great Plains in the 19th century similarly chose to escape religious hate and intolerance in Europe. Their dream was to find, not just a new life on the prairie, but a new religious freedom as broad and unfettered as the plains they now called home.

And yet, religious intolerance still runs deep, even among the persecuted, all these years later. I continue to be disappointed by those kinds of contradictions, and maybe it's why I watch 'organized religion' with a wary eye and from a safe distance. I may not be much of a Christian and I'm sure no biblical scholar, but I do recall the Bible quote my grandpa used to admonish me with, every time I ridiculed a friend or schoolmate. He'd say, "What was it Jesus said? 'Don't worry about the speck in your brother's eye. Worry about the log in your own.'"

Good advice for any religion. And heathens too for that matter.

IN PART 2: My early experiences...my close call--converting for a pretty girl, and The 17 Verses...

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