

# Spirits and Spiritism among the LDS

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**Abstract:** Despite being the product of post-Enlightenment culture and rooted in the industrialized West, the LDS tradition has retained significant space within its piety for practices and sensibilities which admit a spiritual realm which has a direct impact upon the person. The author, through personal reflection and experiences, seeks to introduce the reader to LDS approaches to that spirit realm and the consequences of those approaches. The article focuses primarily on experiences with LDS individuals with whom he came into contact during a decade of pastoral service in Utah and subsequently as a professor of Theology at Concordia University, Portland, Oregon.

Any time one reads a paper about the Latter Day Saints (LDS), or Mormons, one must first ask a methodological question of the author, especially when it is penned by a Lutheran. The methodological question arises from a fundamental fact about the LDS. The LDS are almost completely non-doctrinal. Where most Lutherans understand themselves and just about everyone else through a lens of doctrine, the LDS are most appropriately defined less by doctrines than by practices. While it is true that practice and doctrine are intricately connected, one can extract doctrine from practice. It is also certain that the stated doctrines of the LDS church may have very little to do with the religion of an LDS individual.

This truth leads to the methodological question. Most of the articles and books I have read about Mormonism attempt what is best described as an exposé of the many peculiar LDS tenets of the faith. With lurid glee, they pull the curtain back upon the secret things of Mormonism: pre-existence as a spirit child of Heavenly Father, plural marriage, multiple levels of heaven, and the idea that Jesus came to preach to the descendants of a Jewish prophet (Nephites) in Central America two thousand years ago, just to name a few. There is an entire cottage industry of Christian

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ministries that will bring a knowledgeable presenter to a congregation to lead workshops with the goal of educating Christians about these LDS beliefs, thus “equipping” the flock to rescue these benighted souls from the “maze of error.”<sup>1</sup>

The quotes should suggest that I do not find this approach terribly useful. As with many religious people, most LDS do not actually know that much about what their church teaches and for the most part they are not terribly concerned about it. Christians who argue from the basis of official church doctrine are perplexed by the indifferent shrugs that are the only response to their exposing these things to their LDS friends and neighbors.<sup>2</sup> These LDS did not join the church because they agreed with the doctrine. They are LDS because of practices.

Any fruitful discussion of LDS beliefs needs to be rooted in practice and conversation with Mormons themselves. While this is simply good methodology in any discussion of the adherents of another religion, I have found it to be especially important when talking about the LDS. Exploring the rich trove of peculiar ideas to which the LDS Church has subscribed at various times simply is not useful, nor does it offer an accurate picture of the folks who gather in the LDS Ward<sup>3</sup> down the street in your city.

Another distinction needs to be made when talking about LDS practice and belief. There is a significant difference between the LDS believer who has been born, reared, and lived inside LDS-dominated communities and those who have either converted to the LDS faith or been shaped by extensive exposure to non-LDS communities. The LDS community numerically dominates a significant swath of the intermountain West within the U.S. (Utah, extending into Nevada, Idaho, Arizona, and Wyoming). These communities are further isolated by the vast expanses of desert which make up the Great Basin. Provo, the Cache Valley, even Salt Lake City residents must drive upwards of six or seven hours to encounter a sizeable non-LDS community. This has produced something of a religious ghetto. Reinforced by a preponderance of coreligionists and durable practices, the LDS faith offers the adherent a comprehensive lens through which one can see the whole world, even those non-Mormon elements that come through television and computer screens. If they do not have extensive experience outside this community, these LDS often have a significantly different view of the world than their coreligionists who have lived outside of what they call “Zion.” My experience with those who live outside of these LDS-dominated communities suggests that the comprehensive lens of the LDS faith has largely been superseded by the general post-enlightenment attitude toward spirits that dominates much of American Protestantism. My LDS students at Concordia University, Portland, will occasionally manifest the markers of the LDS from Utah, but most of them are indistinguishable from their classmates in this regard.

This paper will largely focus on the beliefs of LDS who live inside the community dominated by the LDS Church. My experiences have been both with current and devout LDS individuals and with those who had opted to leave the LDS faith and become members of the parish I served in Utah.

The issue of spirits in the LDS became a matter of interest to me shortly after my arrival in Utah in 1991. My neighbor was himself an adult convert to Mormonism. A World War II veteran from Arkansas, he had joined the LDS church in the course of his military service. He had come to Utah and married a lifelong LDS member and Utah native. He pursued higher education and was a professor on the faculty at the University of Utah. Well respected in his community for both his intellect and wisdom, he had served as the Bishop of the local Ward but was now spending his retirement years volunteering in the local LDS temple. An open and truly decent man, he was unfailingly charitable and kind to me, the young Lutheran pastor who lived next door.

His wife, however, was a different story. The only word to describe her expression when we bumped into each other at the flower bed near our property line was terror. She was willing to talk to my wife, but would flee inside the house whenever I was around. It was my wife, ever more observant than me, who noticed this first. Once alerted to it, I began to notice it in others who knew that I was a Christian pastor. The conversation would be quickly and not always politely ended, and the person would seek a speedy exit. The behavior was primarily observed among older, lifelong, and devout LDS.

A member of my parish, who was a convert from Mormonism, explained this to me. The LDS rites within the temple had for many years included the assertion that all Christian clergy were agents of Satan. This oath, which had been part of the ceremony spoken upon entering a temple, had been changed only about fifteen years before I arrived in Utah. My neighbor's reaction to me was not personal; it was because I embodied something of which she was afraid.

We eventually became friends with our neighbor's wife. She and my wife got along well, although I am not sure she ever lost her discomfort with me. We even convinced her to join her husband and come to our home for an open house after our first child was born. While her husband had been in our home several times, it was the first time she had ever set foot in the parsonage near which she had lived for decades. It was not easy for her. My wife and I both noted her reactions after the event. She believed that she was not merely walking into the home of her young neighbors who wanted to show off their new baby to friends but she was walking into a place of spiritual danger for herself. She was very uncomfortable. We both regretted not bringing our child to her home instead.

The LDS have a number of very interesting and, for many ears, odd beliefs about the spirit world. But even more remarkable is that for a post-enlightenment and thoroughly Western community, spirits are remarkably vivid and real for people like my neighbor. While LDS scriptures frequently relate divine messengers, angels, who visited faithful adherents of Heavenly Father (the LDS term most often used for God), these angels do not seem to occupy a significant role in the spirituality of the average LDS. The spirits present in the LDS world are of another sort entirely. They are the source of great fear. It will be interesting for this author to compare his experiences with the LDS attitudes about spirits with the experiences of those authors whose missionary service brought them to communities that are not situated in the post-enlightenment, industrialized West. I suspect that many similar manifestations will be observed.

LDS cosmogony and cosmology suggest that this world is the creation of Heavenly Father, who created it as a place for his many spirit children to gain a corporeal body in order that they might progress to the next levels of being. But before the world was created, a dispute arose among the spirit-children of Heavenly Father. Those who followed the eldest, Jesus—about one third of the spirit children—fought a war against those who followed the next eldest child of Heavenly Father, Lucifer, again about a third. The remaining third took no sides.

While this teaching has been muted of late, early LDS teachings suggested that one could see how valiant the person had been in the pre-corporeal battle against Lucifer by the fairness of the skin. The fairer or lighter the complexion the more valiant the warrior. The spirit children who fought for Lucifer were denied the privilege of gaining a physical body and they became the evil spirits, often called demons, who would always work against the wishes and plans of Jesus and his followers. Tormented by their lack of a body, they are seen to be hostile and constantly seeking to thwart the progression of the children of Heavenly Father to their heavenly goal, preferably the celestial heaven in which the faithful may achieve godhood themselves. Lucifer, also known as Satan, is the primary actor, but he has many servants still. In LDS afterlife, almost no one goes to any sort of hell, but apostate Mormons and demons do. The demonic attack has serious consequences in the minds of LDS faithful.

The LDS rely upon a number of defenses against these demonic forces. They count on Holy Spirit and Holy Ghost, who are in their theology understood to be two different beings. But the most important protection is afforded by temple garments. These are special undergarments into which are woven various symbols. Extending to the mid-thigh and past the shoulder, these garments are the reason the BYU dress code stipulates that all shorts must reach the knee and shirt sleeves must reach the elbow. While this practice is partly attributable to a sense of modesty, it is also the

case that these sacred garments are not to be worn in a way that unbelievers could see them. Granted to those who have earned a temple recommendation from the Stake president, the garments are believed by many pious Mormons to provide substantive protection. One of the parishioners of the congregation I served had grown up as a Mormon and told of bathing her elderly aunt, who insisted that one foot always be outside the tub and her temple garment still about her ankle. When the other foot was washed, she would extend it outside the tub and pull her new set of garments over that ankle before removing the old garments so that she could wash that leg. She was unwilling to be exposed for a moment, even while bathing, without that protection.

If invited into a pious LDS home, one may also notice several other features. Most notable will be a large picture of the local temple prominently displayed near the entrance. One might also note the absence of a cross anywhere in the home. When someone converts to Mormonism, faithful members of the community will come and strip out all the crosses from the home. When living in Utah, I noticed that LDS folk frequently were made uncomfortable by the presence of a cross. Again, my former LDS parishioners helped me understand this. They spoke of the picture of a temple and the absence of a cross as more than simple aesthetic sensibility or a loyalty to a brand or movement. The picture of the temple marked the home as a spiritually safe place and in part conveyed that security. It functioned as a talisman. Crosses, on the other hand, were more than a symbol of Christianity, a religion from which Mormons initially sought to distance themselves. The cross was viewed far more negatively as part of the corruption of the church after the death of the original apostles, a corruption which would only be expunged upon the restoration of the true church through the revelation granted to Joseph Smith. The cross embodied the work of evil forces.

One more experience bears on this subject. In large part, this article is built on the education of a young pastor. As one who had grown up in a traditional LCMS parsonage, I had been told that Jesus truly did cast out demons long ago. I was sure that demons were real, but I only understood them to be an element of the distant past recounted in my New Testament. I had never lived in visceral fear of the demonic.<sup>4</sup> Demons occupied a safe distance from my own world, or at least I thought so. My world was not one in which a person was truly and personally threatened by spirits.

I have also come to understand conversion to be more than a single point in time in which a person becomes a believer. Growing up and throughout my time in the seminary, I had operated with an assumption that conversion was primarily an intellectual event, a changing of the mind. Indeed, conversion is God's saving act but how often it is followed by daily struggle and repentance. The grace of God must

percolate through a human being, and that can take years before it brings a true and lasting peace to a person. Indeed, on this side of heaven, we remain in a struggle between the old man and the new man (Romans 7).

Upon arrival at my first parish, I was introduced to a couple. The man was a rare lifelong Utah Lutheran. His wife was a recent convert from Mormonism and, like many recent converts, was at times somewhat strident in her rejection of the LDS, feeling that she had narrowly escaped something terrible. The next years of our pastoral relationship were, in retrospect, a speedy re-education of this young pastor. Distraught, this young woman would regularly call me and another pastor who had served the vacancy prior to my arrival. These were often long conversations, filled with much emotion. At times, she seemed to be emotionally and mentally disintegrating before our very eyes.

Many would have concluded from these conversations that she was mentally or emotionally unstable, a candidate for psychiatric care. While I cannot absolutely deny this, she asserted that her spirit was under some sort of attack. She had been quite active in the LDS church, undergoing, by her own admission, hundreds of baptisms on behalf of the dead.<sup>5</sup> Members of her large and extended family were to various degrees actively Mormon. Through the course of some continuing education that forced her to reevaluate some elements of her self-conception, her crisis seemed to be coming to head.

It took a great deal of time for the message of grace to take root in all the corners of her life. She never seriously wanted to go back to Mormonism, but a significant pressure was being exerted upon her to reject grace as a possibility. Again and again, we would come back to this in our conversations. Her unworthiness and failures seemingly could not be expunged. I must admit that my initial attempts to deal with this were pathetically inadequate. I assumed that this was an intellectual question for which my Lutheran Confessions and doctrinal preparation had an answer. I supposed that the pressure was purely internal, a matter of not being convinced. I had never been seriously prepared for someone to claim demonic oppression in all seriousness to me. In retrospect, my response to her was pastorally inadequate. Fortunately for her, she had married into a family that knew and practiced unconditional love. Fortunately for her, Christ had made a promise to her in her Baptism that did not depend solely on me to keep.

I am not able to say whether hers was a demonic oppression or something else. Even with some distance from the event and time to consider and pray about it, I am not sure. I am sure that she felt at the time that it was a spiritual battle in which she was engaged and not a mental illness. She believed that she was the object of a personal and malice-filled activity.

One subsequent observation suggests that her estimation of this event was accurate. The peace and obvious joy which I have seen in her subsequently suggests that this period in her life was episodic and not chronic, as most mental afflictions tend to be. I am delighted that she has come to a place of much greater peace and stability.

There are several conclusions one might draw from these anecdotal experiences. All of them need to be recognized for what they are: conclusions based on anecdotal experiences.

1. Within the LDS community, there is a vibrant community of people who, contrary to modern or post-enlightenment sensibilities, hold that spirits are very real and present.
2. Almost exclusively negative, these spirits are a source of fear, or at least that is how the LDS spoke of these spirits in my experience.

I would also say that the LDS church is changing in this regard. There were young people who held these beliefs, and undoubtedly there remain many who do. These beliefs were much stronger among the older members. The LDS church no longer seems to be reinforcing these ideas, either liturgically in the temple rites or through teaching.

The implications of this for ministry and mission are mixed. The nicely dressed and pleasant young men who knock on your door or walk your street while they fulfill their mission are not likely living in terror of a spirit or even thinking about such things, but I cannot rule that out. They will likely look forward to the reception of their temple garments for reasons beyond spiritual protection. Completing a mission and admission to the temple are signature marks of full participation in the LDS community.<sup>6</sup> That said, the young man or woman whom you meet on a mission may be laboring under this sort of fear. My advice to all who meet these young missionaries is to realize that the missionaries themselves are the primary object of the LDS missionary program. The program is really about locking them into the LDS church. I encourage people to see an LDS missionary for what he is, a young person who is out on his own for the first time in his life, probably far from home, walking or biking all day. Do not get in a theological argument with him; rather, show Christian hospitality. Feed him, give him a glass of water or lemonade, and be kind to him. Ask about his family and what he likes to do.

More likely the individual who lives down the street from you, especially if you live in a conservative LDS-dominated community, knows this fear. See him as someone to love. Arguments have gotten me nowhere with the LDS. The first Baptism I ever performed was an old LDS man. He had been married to his Lutheran wife for over forty years at that point. It was not an argument that brought him to that

font. Her persistent, prayerful love brought him there. When I think about my own Baptism, it was no different.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> The best known of these is Utah Lighthouse Ministry founded by Gerald and Sandra Tanner of Salt Lake City.

<sup>2</sup> Perhaps the best of the resources for this approach to talking with the LDS is Mark Cares' text *Speaking the Truth in Love to Mormons* (Northwestern Publishing, 1998).

<sup>3</sup> The LDS are hierarchical. LDS congregations are called Wards and are overseen by an elected lay leader called a Bishop. The size of a Ward is limited, membership being split when numbers grow beyond several hundred members. Wards are established geographically, and every Mormon within a Ward is expected to be an active member of that Ward. A cluster of Wards is called a Stake. The Stake is governed by a President and two advisors, who form the Stake presidency. In Utah, where multiple Wards would meet in one building, Stakes usually comprised about eight Wards.

<sup>4</sup> Growing up in the midst of a Minuteman nuclear missile cluster, I was well acquainted with things to be afraid of, but these demons would come raining down on us from above.

<sup>5</sup> This is the practice within Mormonism in which the name of a deceased person is spoken over a member of the LDS church, who then undergoes a full immersion baptism on behalf of that deceased person. For many devout young people in LDS communities, many hours are dedicated to undergoing repeated baptisms for the dead.

<sup>6</sup> My barber in Utah was a "Jack" Mormon, a non-attending LDS member, who had elected not to go on a mission. He lamented the difficulty he had in finding a date while attending BYU until he had faked having temple garments on under his slacks.