<u>DECONVERSION AS CONFLICT: THE MORAL GRAMMAR OF LATTER-DAY</u>
<u>SAINTS AND EX-MORMONS</u>

by

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Deconversion as Conflict: The Moral Grammar of Latter-day Saints and Ex-Mormons

A Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Science at George Mason University

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DEDICATION

For my dear friends and family, saints and sinners alike.

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ABSTRACT

DECONVERSION AS CONFLICT: THE MORAL GRAMMAR OF LATTER-DAY SAINTS AND EX-MORMONS

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In religious psychology, deconversion is often studied as an intrapersonal phenomenon, a shift from religious belief to disbelief. But deconversion is at least analogous to (if not coterminous with) social conflict in that both are complex, non-linear social phenomena characterized by destructive relational patterns and protracted social identities. Hence this thesis presents a theory of deconversion as conflict. This theory is informed both by original research and the literatures of religious psychology, peace and conflict studies, and narratology. Original research includes a root narrative analysis of a triangulated dataset—five focus group interviews and a small sample of representative texts from three conflict parties. This includes the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, its current members, and its former members. This analysis demonstrates stark differences in moral grammar that make it difficult for each party to understand the points of view of the other. Who one group sees as a hero, the other sees as a villain; and what one group

sees as their primary method of overcoming abuse, the other sees as an abuse of power. These disparate moral systems influence each party to choose resolution strategies such as evangelism and apologetics that fracture their relationship and prevent reconciliation. These findings suggest: a) deconversion transforms the relationships between believers and the newly formed disbeliever, b) evangelism and apologetics are win-lose modes of interaction unfit for the purpose of conflict resolution, and c) a healed relationship between believers and disbelievers will not occur automatically but requires renegotiation.

CHAPTER 1. COMPLEX CONFLICTS AND MORAL CLARITY: THE STUDY OF (EX)MORMONS AND THE STUDY OF CONFLICT

Conflict is a word. It is both a noun and a verb depending on how it is used, and when used as the former, it can refer anything from an interpersonal disagreement to a world war. When discussed in Peace and Conflict Studies circles, "a conflict" is usually referring to a violent conflict between specific groups and in a particular region such as the Northern-Ireland conflict or the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. And yet, this can be deceptive. A conflict is not a single thing, but millions of things occurring in concert. A conflict can include armament, military training and violent acts. It can include government policies that in rule or practice privilege one group over another. It can include the distribution of resources—tangible ones like money, land, and access to healthcare, as well as intangible ones like legitimacy, dignity, and acceptability. It can also include suspicion, hate, disgust and other negative emotions. A conflict can include not only disagreement and grievance between identity groups, but incalculable numbers of events, destructive relationships, physical and psychological wounds, stories, and a habitual hate that can give life meaning to some while simultaneously taking life from others. Conflict is tremendously complex and is constituted by interdependent issues that interact in a non-linear manner.[1] Conflict can be steady or dynamic, and highly adaptive.

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[1] Körppen and Ropers, "Introduction."

And yet, in order to intervene one must have some conception about what is going on; conflict resolution requires some kind of theory, some idea of a conflict's cause. And in the third generation of conflict resolution scholarship, there are a variety of theories to consider. Hans Morgenthau, the father of political realism sees conflict as a clash of interests between self-interested and rational actors who are primarily interested in the acquisition of power.[2] From this *homo-economicus* perspective conflict occurs where means and motives intersect, and resolution comes either through negotiation or force. In his departure from political realism, John W. Burton argues conflict arises from unmet needs, and that values and needs are non-negotiable. From this perspective, conflict cannot be resolved through force, but through satisfying the basic needs of identity, recognition, security, and personal development of conflict parties.[3] If these needs are not met, there will be deviant behavior in one form or another despite the use of force to constrain it.[4] As a Burtonian, Richard Rubenstein argues some conflicts are produced by systems that organize human relationships in destructive ways (i.e. ways that prevent basic needs from being satisfied). Resolving conflict requires positively transforming the system producing conflict.[5] Ted Gurr argues conflict is caused by a discrepancy between expectations and circumstances, and this *relative deprivation* results in frustration that must be expressed.[6] From this perspective, resolution involves changing expectations, circumstances, or finding non-violent means of expressing frustration. While this is a

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[2] Morgenthau, *Politics among Nations*.
[3] Rubenstein, "Basic Human Needs: The Next Steps in Theory Development."
[4] Burton, *Deviance, Terrorism & War*.
[5] Rubenstein, *Resolving Structural Conflicts*.
[6] Gurr, *Why Men Rebel*.

mere four examples, there are dozens more. Peace and conflict studies is multidisciplinary, has perhaps no center, and captures within its borders the hard sciences, the humanities and social sciences—from psychology to economics.[7] There are many theories, each with unique insights.

All theories of conflict identify potentially destructive elements of a complex social reality. But to make a valid argument about the nature of persons or the root causes of conflict, individual premises must be written despite each one relying on infinite contingencies. For this reason, no theory can tell us *the* way conflict is, but only *a* way conflict is. Each theory is like a character intersecting and interacting with others, seemingly at random. And while there may be a broader storyline, no theory can capture its complexity without losing its coherence. As Nelson Goodman has argued, simplicity itself is one of the standards of validity in any theory.[8] If there were a way to capture conflict's complexity in a single theory, it would be a theory we could not understand and therefore could not base our actions upon. The unpredictability and nonlinearity of conflict elements cannot be contained in any closed theoretical system. Thus, there is a constant tension between complex realities and the coherency of conflict theory. Because of this tension, any coherent theory of conflict and resolution must be a simplification of realities. But it ought to be a well-considered simplification that motivates actions that

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[7] Avruch, "Does Our Field Have a Centre?"
[8] Goodman, "The Test of Simplicity."

build constructive relationships. Conflict is a word used to describe an infinite interplay of incalculable variables, and yet we must invent coherent theories to resolve it.[9]

There is a tension between theoretical coherence and complex realities, but there is also a tension between theoretical coherence and actionability. The clearer a theory, the easier it is to base our actions upon it. For example, many first- and second-generation conflict early warning systems analyze large numbers of interrelated variables in the attempt to predict and warn of approaching conflict.[10] But as many have argued, these systems have a seemingly chronic gap between warning and response.[11] In other words, these systems could generate early warnings, but these warnings rarely led to an early response. It was not until smaller, localized systems based on fewer variables (third and fourth generation systems) were created that conflict early warning overcame the warning-response gap.[12] One way to understand the warning-response gap is to recognize the tension between theoretical coherence and actionability; lean too far into the complexity of conflict, and the ensuing convolution may prevent response.[13] Or as David Nyheim put it, "If the problem was that 'early warning is not wired to the bulb', today there are too many bulbs competing with each other or not working when they should."[14]

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[9] I owe much of my argument in this paragraph to Cornel West in his genealogy of pragmatism, "The American Evasion of Philosophy," especially in his consideration of W.V. Quine and Richard Rorty.

[10] See Jack Goldstone, "Pathways to State Failure" and Dennis J.D. Sandole, *Capturing the Complexity of Conflict*.

[11] Adelman, "From Early Warning to Effective Early and Long Term Responses."

[12] Bock, "Firmer Footing for a Policy of Early Intervention"; David Nyheim, "Preventing Violence, War and State Collapse: The Future of Conflict Early Warning and Response."

[13] As Tadakazu Kanno, notes in her dissertation "Critical Early Warning," one of the issues with first generation conflict early warning systems was information overload.

[14] David Nyheim, "Preventing Violence, War and State Collapse: The Future of Conflict Early Warning and Response," 83.

The Purposes of this Thesis

This thesis presents a theory of *deconversion* as conflict but starts by recognizing two points: that conflict may never be fully understood, and that it does not have to be fully understood to be resolved. Many conflict theories consider a specific type of conflict. For example, Vamik Volkan's theory of collective trauma is primarily about ethnic conflict, and Hans Morgenthau's theory of *realpolitik* is primarily about interstate wars.[15] But there is so far no theory of *deconversion-conflicts*, or rather, a theory specific to the conflict occurring when one moves from belief to disbelief and leaves their religious community. And while I believe most psychologists, sociologists, and religious studies experts would agree that conflict is an element of deconversion, I know of no one who has considered deconversion as conflict. This is one of the aims of this thesis. Deconversion as conflict is limited in scope, particular to one type of conflict, and specific in its intended application because I seek to make '*a* way conflict is' understandable for the purpose of conflict resolution.

Through a root narrative analysis of representative texts and focus group interviews, this thesis considers the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (the Church) its believing members (members / Latter-day Saints / believers), its doubting members (Undecided members / non-believers), and former members (Ex-Mormons / disbelievers) to understand *deconversion-conflict* at the point of language and explores

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[15] Volkan, *Bloodlines*; Morgenthau, *Politics among Nations*.

how their disparate moral systems relate to the conflict between them. Root narrative theory is a good fit for two reasons. While all conflict is a contest over meaning,[16] this is a conflict that may be uniquely about meaning. For example, there are no tangible resource like land or money these communities are competing for. And there are no clear ethnic identifiers between them. With one group as devout believers in Mormonism, and the other as disbelieving Ex-Mormons, the locus of the conflict lies not in a resource, geography, or in a contested identity; the locus of the conflict is *in* language. And as Alexander Austin has argued, the origins of conflict do not necessarily rely on empirical causal relationships outside of the individual but rather within their perception.[17] While events, institutions, and social structures play a role in conflict, they do not explain themselves; they are understood only through narrative.[18] Both conflict and its resolution rely fundamentally on the intersubjective creation of meaning. And while chapter five considers the role of social structures in the production of deconversion-conflict, this thesis argues that what is most relevant to deconversion is not the empirical world, but an understanding of how believers and disbelievers perceive their world.

The first purpose of this thesis is to consider how the Church, its members, and former members make sense of their world through narrative by conducting a root narrative analysis of representative discourse and focus group interviews. The second purpose of this thesis is to consult the texts, interview data, and the literatures on the bio-

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[16] See Cobb, *Speaking of Violence*.
[17] Austin, "Early Warning and The Field."
[18]See Ronald R. Krebs, *Narrative and the Making of US National Security* and H. Porter Abbott, *The Cambridge Introduction to Narrative*.

psycho-social benefits of religious experience, the studies of Ex-Mormon deconversion, and theories of conflict to inform a theory of deconversion as conflict, deconversion as narrative transformation, and suggest some steps to the resolution of conflict between believers and disbelievers.

Deconversion begins at the onset of doubt, and functions as an intrapersonal conflict. Like other forms of social conflict, it is complex, non-linear, and characterized by destructive relationships between disparate identity groups. Once the doubter becomes a disbeliever, the conflict shifts from a primarily intrapersonal conflict to an interpersonal one. It is not unusual for conflicts to qualitatively shift, and in this case, from one social level to another. Within *totalistic faith communities*—those comprising the majority of one's friends, family, and identity—a personal shift from belief to disbelief transforms their relationships with believers. In the Latter-day Saint context, this transformation is often negative. The believer sees the shift as a threat to the disbeliever's spiritual/physical wellbeing, and they often reach into their social toolkit for one of two resolution strategies: *evangelism* or *apologetics*. Both of these are win-lose modes of interaction that seek to defeat the disbeliever's new or forming identity (or the believer's identity). What is often unknown to the believer is by the time they are made aware of the deconversion, the disbeliever either feels liberated from a back-and-forth struggle with their former religious identity or are in need of social support while they negotiate a painful transition. In either case, the disbeliever is often severed from the sources of inner strength they once relied upon and may be experiencing a traumatic loss of identity, network of social support, stable cognition, and emotional stability.

Deconversion transforms the relationship between believers and disbelievers by taking the latter out of their religious identity group. In order to preserve positive relations with believers, the relationship must be renegotiated. I argue that in the Latter-day Saint context, the best route to preserving healthy relationships after deconversion is likely through a reconciliatory *interdependence* approach rather than a '*contact*' or *superordinate identity* approach. [19] Contact is not lacking in this conflict, believers and disbelievers have already experienced significant, quality contact and already love and care for the other. But as I will argue in chapters four and five, 'care' is weaponized in deconversion-conflict and is expressed in destructive ways. Deconversion can also be understood as the disintegration of the superordinate identity the parties once shared, and only friendly or familial identities remain as salient alternatives. However, family is important in the Latter-day Saint community. I theorize that framing 'family' as an interdependent performance after deconversion may open the door to a recognition of familial interdependence and a renegotiation toward positive relations. This should involve *boundary setting* wherein both parties agree to forego evangelism or apologetics in the interests of preserving their relationships and the performance of 'family.' I argue this could also be applied to chosen friendships.

This thesis seeks to build on the work of prior narrative studies and hopes to contribute to the growing understanding of Ex-Mormons, Latter-day Saints, deconversion, and religious conflicts. And while my theory of deconversion as conflict

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[19] This approach leans on Fanie Du Toit's theory of reconciliation as interdependence found in his book *When Political Transitions Work*.

draws considerably from the work of others, my training in peace and conflict studies lends a unique understanding currently absent in the literatures on Mormonism, Ex-Mormons, and deconversion. This thesis also has implications for peace and conflict theories such as John Burton's theory of basic human needs, Solon Simmons root narrative theory, Richard Rubenstein's theory of structural conflict and the vast literatures on identity conflict and so-called 'religious conflicts.' And finally, this thesis has implications for sociological and psychological theories such as Emile Durkheim's theory of anomie, and the multifactorial theories used to explain the correlation between religiosity and increased wellbeing.

The Methodologies and Findings of Ex-Mormon Narrative Studies

While this thesis is not exclusively about Ex-Mormons and includes a thorough consideration of the narrative worlds and experiences of Latter-day Saints, former believers are the embodiment of conflict in faith communities. In them the faith has been believed, struggled with, and ultimately rejected. This is also true of believers who have at one point struggled but reconnected with and even refortified their faith. However, this is not a thesis about the resolution of former intrapersonal conflicts but considers an ongoing conflict between believers and former believers and how *that* conflict can be resolved. For this reason, the literature considered in this chapter is primarily about the Ex-Mormon experience.

While this is not the first time Ex-Mormons have been studied, there are more gaps in the literature than there is literature. We know from The Pew Research Center's (PRC) report, "The Changing Global Religious Landscape" that at the global scale, when a person is "switching" religions, they are most likely leaving a Christian religion for the "unaffiliated" category comprising atheists, agnostics and unaffiliated deists.[20] In other words, the PRC projects that deconversion is the most common type of religious switching. To discover this, The PRC engaged in an applied systems analysis that collected demographics data from more than 2,500 censuses.[21] Their methodology produced a valuable projection of global shifts in religiosity. But like any methodology, it has its weaknesses. For example, the content of religious belief and practice is neither universal within a religious tradition, nor is it consistent over time. But their study treats "Christian," "Muslim," and "Atheist," as concrete and unchanging variables. What it means to be Christian in 2020 is not equal to what it meant to be a Christian in 1820 and will likely not be equal to what it means to be a Christian in 2035. Similarly, what it means to be a Muslim in Los Angeles may not be the same as what it means to be a Muslim in Tehran. Only when attempting to understand quantitative shifts does it make sense to treat a religious tradition as a single variable consistent over time and space.[22]

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[20] Hackett and Stonawski, "The Changing Global Religious Landscape."

[21] As Howard Raiffa noted in William C. Clark's report "Looking at Ourselves: Thoughts on Process and Product in Applied Systems Analysis" applied systems analysis is less of a strict technique or methodology and more of an approach to resolving complex problems. Applied Systems Analysis attempts to rationally apply a variety of methods from many disciplines.

[22] In Appendix B of their study Hackett and Stonawski acknowledge that what it means to be "Christian," "Muslim," etc. Changes across persons, countries, and decades (Hackett and Stonawski 41).

While often much smaller in scale, studies that mix qualitative and quantitative data have greater descriptive capabilities. For example, in the writing of her book *The Next Mormons*, Jana Reiss surveys a random sample of 1,156 Mormons and 540 Ex-Mormons to identify shifts in belief and practice over time.[23] She finds that the Boomer/Silent, Generation X, and Millennial generations differ greatly on matters of religious import, notions of morality, beliefs, and levels of religiosity.[24] In short, Reiss was able to demonstrate that "Mormonism" is not a consistent variable over time. Of import to this thesis, Reiss also found that, within the Millennial generation, the Church is only retaining 46% of its members.[25] That is a sharp decrease in retention for a church that retained 72% of the Boomer generation.

Mixed method designs have also been used to study sub-communities within the LDS Church.[26] In Nancy Ross and Jessica Finnigan's article "Mormon Feminist Perspectives on the Mormon Digital Awakening: A Study of Identity and Personal Narratives" they use a self-completion internet survey to learn what Latter-day Saint Feminists believe, what changes they want to see in Church policy, and how they feel about LDS Feminist activism.[27] They found that while the majority of Latter-day Saint feminists are believing and active, they differ with most saints in that they believe women

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[23] Riess, *The Next Mormons*.
[24] Riess, 17.
[25] Riess, 6.
[26] The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS) is the most well-known Mormon Church. In this proposal "LDS" and "Mormon" will be used synonymously.
[27] Ross and Finnigan, "Mormon Feminist Perspectives on the Mormon Digital Awakening."

should, and one day will, hold priesthood authority.[28] In other words, Ross and Finnigan demonstrate that even within the faith there are important differences in belief and expectations between leaders and members and from one member to another.[29]

Lauren J. Joseph and Stephen Cranney's article "Self-esteem among lesbian, gay, bisexual and same-sex-attracted Mormons and Ex-Mormons" serves as a particularly good example of what can be done when survey data is paired with a form of multiple regression analysis.[30] Joseph and Cranney collected survey data from *SSA* (same sex attracted) Latter-day Saints and LGB (lesbian, gay, bisexual) Ex-Mormons and analyzed survey results with path analysis to discover the source of their self-esteem.[31] They found that while both communities report the same degree of self-esteem, these are causally related to different sources. Those who are attracted to the same sex but do not act on this attraction (SSA Latter-day Saints) gain self-esteem from family and community ties while LGB Ex-Mormons gain self-esteem from self-honesty by accepting their LGB identity.

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[28] In Mormonism, the priesthood is given by ordination and is considered the authority to act in God's name. The priesthood comes with a variety of spiritual blessings and ecclesiastic duties dependent on which priesthood office one holds.

[29] Some thinkers such as Janet L. Dolgin and Mark Leone have gone so far as to assert common behavioral norms are the mark of a Latter-day Saint, and that Mormonism is, in a sense, noncreedal. Other thinkers such as Kendall O. White and Daryl White sharply disagree with them. See: Dolgin, "Latter-Day Sense and Substance"; Leone, "The Economic Basis for the Evolution of the Mormon Religion"; White and White, "A Critique of Leone's and Dolgin's Application of Bellah's Evolutionary Model to Mormonism."

[30] Joseph and Cranney, "Self-Esteem among Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Same-Sex-Attracted Mormons and Ex-Mormons."

[31] Crossman, "What Is Path Analysis?"; Robson, *Real World Research*, 443; "SSA" refers to those persons who are attracted to the same sex but do not act on their attraction. While this term has come under scrutiny from the LGBTQ+ community, it is used here to reflect the research under consideration and out of respect for those who identify as SSA.

Each research design, method, and methodology has its own strengths and weaknesses. PRC's report is a valuable study that predicts global trends in religiosity. But it does not help us understand the dynamics of intragroup difference. The survey studies considered in this section are not able to predict global trends, but they do provide thorough descriptions of the content and variability of religious belief and practice over time and between sub-communities in the Church. By mixing survey data with sophisticated methods of analysis, it is possible to answer a variety of questions, as Joseph and Cranney, and others have demonstrated. And yet, survey methods of data collection are not without their limitations as well. Surveys offer us a glimpse into religious stories but without much description. We may know that a community holds X belief, or wants to see Y change, but this does not necessarily tell us why they hold this belief or why they want to see change. The surveys used to study Latter-day Saints and Ex-Mormons do not reveal the evaluative point of their stories and are at best a token of understanding their world views. Gaining a deeper understanding requires the researcher to collect representative qualitative data about what it means to believe X, how that belief is tied to a nexus of other beliefs, and how this *moral system* works to unite a people, justify action, and interpret events. This requires rich qualitative data and thick description.[32] Ethnography, interviews, and narrative or discourse analysis are all better candidates for understanding the *moral logic* of a group. In this chapter I only consider narrative studies, but Chapter five considers selected ethnographies and studies of Ex-Mormon interviews.

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[32] See Robson, *Real World Research*, 143.

Unfortunately, there is a limited number of narrative analyses on the Ex-Mormon community. Using the keywords, "Ex-Mormon," and "narrative," I searched ProQuest Dissertations & Theses, Google Scholar, Academic Search Complete and the religious studies database JSTOR, the sociology databases of SocINDEX, ProQeust, and ProQuest Social Science Database. I was only able to find seven relevant studies, four of which relied on data from the same online sources—Amorette Hinderaker and Amy O'Connor, Seth Payne, Kristina M. Scharp and Aubrey L. Beck all collect data from postmormon.org and exmormon.org. While each use their data to discover something about Ex-Mormons, these articles differ dramatically in their method of analysis and research questions.

In Amorette Hinderaker and Amy O'Connor's "The Long Road Out," they rely on David M. Boje's microstoria—a method that analyzes the "autobiographical narratives about daily life and experiences within an organization as told by the 'little people.'"[33] Their article reveals important information about the exit process, which they found to be a non-linear, and often multi-year process of micro-disassociations. While they do not use the phrase 'intrapersonal conflict' in their article, their description of the deconversion process is a description of conflict. This will be discussed further in Chapter five.

Seth Payne's "Ex-Mormon Narratives and Pastoral Apologetics" includes a grounded theory approach to analyzing exit narratives. Payne builds on the work of David Bromley's social constructionist theory of deconversion that sees the exit process as determined by organizational type as well as Armand Mauss's work in "The Angel and

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[33] Hinderaker and O'Connor, "The Long Road Out," 514.

the Beehive" which tracks the Church's social positionality through history according to Bromley's typology. [34] Payne agrees with Mauss that the Church sits somewhere between an allegiant and contestant organization and argues Ex-Mormon exit narratives are determined by this positionality. While Payne's is an important study and will be discussed in further detail below and in Chapter five, it does not further an understanding of Ex-Mormons. Ex-Mormon grievances are vaguely described but never quoted or considered in their own right. Instead, their narratives are instrumentally considered to inform Payne's approach to apologetics.

In Amorette Hinderaker's "Severing Primary Ties," she too considers exit narratives in relation to organizational type. But rather than Bromley's typology, she relies on organizational exit literature that usually considers professional membership and theorizes 'pay' as the defining feature of membership and exit. In conversation with this literature, Hinderaker argues that organizational values play a stronger role in the exit process than indicated by previous research.[35] While Hinderaker draws data from postmormon.org and exmormon.org, she does introduce random sampling to her selection of the narratives. And, at the time of data collection, these were the two largest repositories of Ex-Mormon exit narratives.

Kristina M. Scharp and Aubrey L. Beck's "Losing my Religion" conduct a thematic narrative analysis on 150 Ex-Mormon exit narratives from postmormon.org wherein they found five major themes: (1) the disenfranchised victim, (2) the redeemed

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[34] Bromley, "Linking Social Structure and the Exit Process in Religious Organizations"; Mauss, *The Angel and the Beehive*.
[35] Hinderaker, "Severing Primary Ties," January 1, 2015.

spiritualist, (3) the liberated self, (4) the (wo)men of science, and (5) the Mormon in name only.[36] Each theme is a type of reconstructed identity following the deconversion experience. Scharp and Beck conclude by tying their work to Hinderaker's and O'Connor's research, considering the variety of perceived identity threats to each type of Ex-Mormon, and note that leaving the Church is more than merely leaving an organization.

Rosemary Avance's "Seeing the Light," is the only study I have found that compares heterodox Latter-day Saint narratives to those of Ex-Mormons. Avance triangulates two datasets, both comprising members of each community: she conducts a dialogic analysis of 17 in-depth interviews, and a digital ethnography of two unnamed digital communities, one for heterodox Latter-day Saints and one for former members. Avance's analysis focusses on testimonials within both communities, which are considered *factive performatives*, or "ritual utterances which affect the change that they state."[37] Avance's consideration of testimonials as a performative ritual that binds one to a community applies to both groups but in distinct ways. Latter-day Saints testifying that they 'know the Church is true,' is a performative and bodied ritual that binds them to the community. Ex-Mormon deconversion stories are no less performative, but they are disembodied (online), and often anonymous.

Tiffany Dawn Kinney's dissertation, "Cultivating Legitimacy in a Religious Context" is a rhetorical historiography and historical discourse analysis of three

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[36] Scharp and Beck, "'Losing My Religion.'"
[37] Avance, "Constructing Religion in the Digital Age," 20; see Rappaport, *Ritual and Religion in the Making of Humanity*.

prominent Ex-Mormon feminists—Emmaline B. Wells, Sonia Johnson, and Kate Kelly—

that considers the rhetorical strategies they use to cultivate legitimacy for themselves and

women in the Church.[38] While each present their case differently to fit a dynamic social

context, each attempts to reform a patriarchal and hierarchal institution to include a

delegitimized and marginalized group—women. Kinney's analysis of each rhetor is

systematic, including the whole of their historical (or digital) archive. Kinney found that

Wells draws both from first-wave feminism, Christian morality, and Mormon

exceptionalism to legitimize her authority. Johnson argues that legitimacy in a flawed

structure contributes to more inequality and imagines a more equitable structure. Kelly

attempts to legitimate women within the Church through both discourse and motivating

faith-based actions for structural reform within the Church.[39]

There is more literature that seeks to represent Ex-Mormon narratives, but it does

not meet the empirical standards of any epistemological tradition. For example, Melanie

Brewster's edited volume *Atheists in America* is a compilation of first-person narratives

by American atheists. This book is full of stories from atheists with differing religious

backgrounds, experience, race, gender, and sexual orientation. Several of these stories are

from Ex-Mormons. While this book includes in depth accounts of religious exit, it does

not reveal its own selection methods. Brewster notes a national call for atheist stories but

does not describe the instructions included in this call nor the selection criteria. [40] The

common themes and story elements within these narratives would be useful if we knew

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[38] Kinney, "Cultivating Legitimacy in a Religious Context."
[39] Kinney, 33–34.
[40] Brewster, *Atheists in America*, 20.

how representative they were of the Ex-Mormon experience. Because we know nothing of Brewster's data collection methods, these narratives should be considered anecdotal, and unusable for a study that seeks to make generalizable claims. Similarly, there are a variety of blogs, podcasts, and other forms of popular literature by and about Ex-Mormons not considered in this thesis.

It is troubling that all but two empirical narrative studies of Ex-Mormons draw from the same data repository—Payne, Hinderaker and O'Connor, Scharp and Beck all draw from postmormon.org and exomormon.org, the former of which no longer exists. As Ryan T. Cragun argues in his letter to the editor of *Dialogue*, there may be differences between the minority of Ex-Mormons who are vocal in their criticism, and the majority who leave the Church quietly.[41] Cragun's argument relies on an unknown since what makes the nonvocal majority of Ex-Mormons nonvocal is that their stories are not in the public domain. But there may be important differences. Current studies may overrepresent the vocal minority who may or may not differ from the majority in experience, ideology, and other ways. Therefore, the nonvocal majority of Ex-Mormons should be sought out and considered in future studies. As will be discussed below, this is one reason I triangulate data from both online communities and focus group interviews.

Each of the authors considered above offer unique contributions that increase our understanding of the deconversion experience. From Avance we learn that while Ex-Mormons have left a community, many have also joined a largely disembodied and

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[41] Cragun, "Letter to the Editor: 'Apostates,' 'Anti-Mormons,' and Other Problems in Seth Payne's 'Ex-Mormon Narratives and Pastoral Apologetics.'"

anonymous community of online Ex-Mormons. Hinderaker's description of the Church as a totalistic institution—one that is central to a member's life and identity, extends into everyday experience and involves primary relationships—is central to understanding deconversion from Mormonism. As Scharp and Beck argue, leaving the Church is not simply leaving an organization. Hinderaker and O'Connor's discovery of deconversion as a long, non-linear process of micro-disassociations experienced primarily in secret suggests deconversion-conflict begins at the onset of doubt and is experienced within the person before it becomes an interpersonal conflict. Yet, Scharp and Beck's typology of Ex-Mormon reconstructions demonstrates thoroughly that not every deconversion is the same. There are a variety of Ex-Mormons and a variety of deconversion experiences. Payne is helpful in noting that where Ex-Mormons go after deconversion also plays a role in their view of the Church. Those who leave Mormonism for evangelical Christianity, those who leave for fringe Mormon groups, and those who become unaffiliated deists, agnostics, and atheists differ considerably. And while neither Payne nor Bromley study deconversion as a conflict, their observations contribute to my theory.

Bromley's organizational typology includes *allegiant*, *contestant* and *subversive* institutions, each delineated by its degree of tension with other institutions in its environment. Each type is a social location determined by both the institution and others in its social environment, and each tends to produce different types of organizational exit. Allegiant organizations have interests that coincide to a high degree with other organizations in their environments and tend to produce *defectors*, or those who negotiate

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their exit with organizational authorities.[42] Contestant organizations have a moderate

level of coincidence and tension with others in their environment and tend to produce

whistle-blowers, or those who give testimony against organizational practices upon exit.[43]

Subversive organizations have an extremely low coincidence of interests with others in

their environment and tend to produce *apostates*, or those who, in a highly polarized

situation, allies with an oppositional coalition and experiences a total change of

loyalties.[44] In a more or less united society, Bromley's examples of each institution seem

to justify his typology: medical organizations and colleges are allegiant institutions,

profit-making economic institutions are contestant, and controversial religious

organizations and radical Rightist or Leftists political movements are subversive.[45]

Bromley's typology makes sense enough but falls apart when considering *divided*

societies. According to John Paul Lederach, a divided society is one that expresses three

criteria: cohesion and identity is understood within increasingly narrower lines than

national citizenship, some areas experience fractionalization and diffusion of power away

from the state, and these conflicts rest on long-standing relationships such as the history

of indigenous genocide and slavery.[46] In such a society, meaning is constructed in sub-

national communities, opening the way for a diversity of social positions, each dependent

on the amount of tension the institution has with a particular community. In practice, this

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[42] Bromley, "Linking Social Structure and the Exit Process in Religious Organizations," 147.
[43] Bromley, 150.
[44] Bromley, 153; Bromley notes, "this linking of organizational forms and exit roles should not, or course, be construed as deterministic…the argument here is simply that the different social locations of allegiant, contestant, and subversive organizations generate a combination of opportunities and constraints in the direction of the specified forms of exit" (Bromley, 146).
[45] Payne, "Ex-Mormon Narratives and Pastoral Apologetics," 87–88.
[46] Lederach, *Building Peace*, 11–18.

is perhaps obvious to contemporary Americans and many others who can see that the degree of tension police departments, planned parenthood, and even universities have with various sub-national groups varies widely. In a society where both "blue lives matter!" and "defund the police!" are well-known slogans, it is unclear whether police departments are allegiant or subversive. Allegiant to whom? Subversive to whom?

Almost any institution in divided societies has a contested social position, [47] including the Church. From the position of contemporary state governments, the Church tends to produce healthy, productive, and engaged citizens who contribute to society (allegiant). But from the position of other Christian organizations, the Church's attempt to convert their members with tens of thousands of full-time missionaries makes the Church either a contestant or subversive organization. The Church's social location is not universal but dependent on a group's intersubjective creation of meaning. Institutions and their actions do not explain themselves, but are interpreted through genre, values, and story structures. Thus, while Payne and Bromley have important insights, Bromley's typology is less helpful in divided social environments where the social position of almost any institution is contested. What is more helpful in the study of contest and conflict are narrative theories and typologies that help us understand the diverse ways institutions are positioned in discourse, and the diverse ways policies and events are interpreted. For this we should turn to those who study the intersection of conflict and

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[47] As I have noted elsewhere, the one exception to this seems to be libraries (see Oakley Thomas Hill, "Making Conversations Great Again").

narrative: Gerald Monk and John Winslade, Philip Smith, Sara Cobb, Samantha Hardy, and Solon Simmons.

Narratology and Conflict Resolution

Despite the complexity of a conflict, most stories told about it can be characterized by moral simplicity. A conflict's complexity is reduced to what the speaker deems its essential features and communicated to others. As Gerald Monk and John Winslade note, the speaker in a conflict setting usually deems the blame and objectification of the other as the conflict's essential feature. Yet, each *conflict story* differs in its plot, characters, and themes because they are drawn from cultural scripts.[48] Monk and Winslade's practice of narrative mediation helps conflict parties externalize the problem so that it, rather than the other, can be objectified and blamed. This allows parties to explore the effects of conflict rather than its cause. This increases their motivation to embrace a counter story and work together to resolve a shared problem.[49]

Philip Smith, Samantha Hardy, Sara Cobb, and Solon Simmons have each identified the importance of genre in conflict. Conflict stories are often told in apocalyptic or melodramatic genres, which limits one's resolution strategies to destructive actions. In the book *Why War?* Smith analyzes 1,700 news articles, codes them by genre, and found that the countries who narrated a conflict through a high mimetic (or apocalyptic) genre went to war, while those who narrated conflict through

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[48] Monk and Winslade, *When Stories Clash*, 28–43.
[49] Monk and Winslade, 74.

low mimetic (or tragedy) genre did not. Rather than the word 'mimetic' it may be helpful to think of Smith's theory of genre analysis in terms of temperature. The 'apocalyptic' genre (high temperature) includes three elements: these stories are about extraordinary events, are claimed to have global significance, and are about 'our' fundamental ideals (e.g., George Bush Jr.'s post-9/11 stories about terrorism). When events are interpreted through this genre, the temperature is up, and violence becomes more likely. A low mimetic genre (low temperature) is about mundane, local events of limited importance. These genres are correlated with a lower likelihood of violence. The more apocalyptic the genre the more magnified differences between conflict parties become and the less apparent their similarities are.

Cobb's book *Speaking of Violence* covers an array of narrative perspectives and articulates numerous interrelated theories including: a) how conflict narratives influence conflict dynamics, b) how conflict dynamics and power produce *radicalized narratives* that enslave the speaker and marginalize others by reducing the scope of meaning and demanding participation,[50] c) how radicalized narratives produce *narrative violence* or objectify and marginalize the other in discourse by separating them from narrative and relegating them to the language of agency to account for their pain and suffering,[51] d) the importance of Hannah Arendt's notion of natality as legitimacy in producing *better formed stories*, and e) an ethic of critical narrative practice. Perhaps the most well-known aspect of Cobb's theory is in the comparison of radicalized narratives and better formed

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[50] Cobb, *Speaking of Violence*, 133.
[51] Cobb, 33.

stories. While Cobb's work differs from Smith's, both rest on the observation that moral simplicity relates to violence and moral complexity does not. Cobb's practice of narrative mediation is based on the creation of better formed stories. Better formed stories are not temporally simple, they still connect the past, present, and future but fill-out history with more events; better formed stories include more characters than the speaker and the other which disrupts simple causality and blaming; and better formed stories do not simply attribute positive intensions to 'us' and negative intentions to 'them' but positively connote the actions of others. Cobb notes that genre has a colonizing effect on narratives and argues a better formed story is more like Aristotle's tragedy genre.

Samantha Hardy agrees with Cobb and argues the tragedy genre is a viable alternative to the melodrama genre because it is better for the purposes of understanding conflict stories and for the purposes of conflict resolution.[52] While both Cobb and Hardy use distinct terms, they both agree that narrative approaches to conflict resolution should involve moving conflict parties from a kind of moral clarity to moral complexity, thereby limiting the impetus for violence and making room for the stories of marginalized persons.

Solon Simmons in his book *Root Narrative Theory and Conflict Resolution* agrees that the aim of narrative interventions should involve a movement from clarity to complexity but disagrees that the tragedy genre should be the final destination of a conflict resolution process. The clarity / complexity scale is not the only measure of a

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[52] Hardy, "Mediation and Genre."

conflict narrative. Simmons includes a generativity and critical scale as well.[53] Rather

than Hardy's two genres (melodrama and tragedy), Simmons considers four major

conflict genres: romance, melodrama, tragedy, and redemption. The former two embody

moral clarity while the latter two embody moral complexity. Tragedy does move a party

toward reflection, but it also trades generativity for stagnation. This may be temporarily

necessary to slow *violent consensus*,[54] but it does not only mitigate violent action; it

mitigates all action. Simmons argues instead that the ultimate, if only eventual goal for

narrative interventions should be to move conflict parties toward the redemption genre,

wherein the complexity of conflicts can be recognized without producing stagnation. In

the redemption genre, harm is perpetrated on both sides, but the evaluative point of the

story is generative; recognizing that both sides have contributed to the conflict brings

hope that the past can be overcome by a brighter, redemptive future.

Cobb, Hardy, and Smith offer profound and original insights into narrative

interventions that help to move conflict parties away from violence. But as the founder of

peace and conflict studies Johan Galtung famously argued in his distinction of positive

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[53] Simmons argument for redemption narrative builds on Dan McAdams "The Redemptive Self" and Eric Erikson's "Childhood and Society." As I will argue in Chapter five, it also directly relates to reconciliation, a sub-sector of peace and conflict studies.

[54] In Donald Horowitz's "The Deadly Ethnic Riot" he argues that in between a precipitating event and an ethnic riot, there is a period of time where consensus building for violence occurs. This includes members of the ethnic group assessing and exaggerating the threat, downplaying the risks of participating in violence, and engaging moral argument. To prevent intercommunal violence in Sri Lanka one intervention design by the Foundation for Co-Existence (FCE) included training mid-level leaders of each community to decrease the intensity of consensus building and increasing the time it took to build consensus on the theory that this would prevent ethnic riots. While it is difficult to assess conflict prevention, the FCE intervened in 174 cases in its first six years and is generally considered a good example of a conflict early warning and early response system (see Endaragalle, "Theoretical Justifications for FCE's Early Warning and Early Response System").

and negative peace, positive peace is not merely the cessation of violence but the presence of social justice.[55] Simmons brings the conversation about narrative interventions into the realm of positive peacebuilding where violence can not only be mitigated, but positive peace can be generated. This involves redemption narratives that can simultaneously recognize the moral complexity of conflict (i.e., all parties contribute to a conflict) and maintain the generative energy necessary to build positive peace.

Simmons' theory not only argues for a redemptive practice, but he also discovers the *root narrative* and lays out a root narrative typology. Simmons has found that any discourse about problems or politics, morality or conflict is told using a primitive moral grammar, or what he calls a root narrative; this includes an *antagonist abusing power to create harm for a protagonist*.[56] Simmons argues these four elements are the emotional roots of all political discourse. Other narrative structuralists such as Vladimir Propp have long seen common plot elements and character functions across time and culture.[57] Simmons argues a root narrative can be found in any political discourse be it the driest of academic literature or the vitriolic chants of a mob. It may not be possible to coherently 'story' human conflict without some kind of antagonist, abuse of power, harm, and protagonist.

Because Simmons considers storytelling and argument as fundamentally the same in his theory, Simmons differs with other narrative thinkers such as Jerome Bruner. Bruner sees a fundamental difference between the narrative mode and the paradigmatic

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[55] Galtung, "Violence, Peace, and Peace Research."
[56] Simmons, *Root Narrative Theory and Conflict Resolution*.
[57] Propp and Dundes, *Morphology of the Folktale*.

mode of imagination by asserting, "a good story and a well-formed argument are different natural kinds [while] both can be used as a means for convincing another."[58] While a good story and an argument are not synonymous, Simmons argues that in political discourse, both arguments and stories are similar because they share the primitive moral grammar of root narratives. Bruner's division between the two modes is perhaps the narrative extension of Platonic and Kantian distinctions between passion and rationality.[59] Simmons, who sees root narratives as "the emotional core of a rational argument,"[60] is perhaps a narrative extension of Humean thought, seeing reason itself as a justificatory tool of the passions.[61] In fact, Simmons adds depth to Hume's argument, illustrating in detail how reason is used to serve the passions. Reason is often a tool used by the emotional brain to argue for a moral story, a story about how the antagonist is abusing power and causing harm to the protagonist. If the thinking brain most often serves the interests of the emotional brain—as social psychologists like Jonathan Haidt and others have discovered[62]—Simmons has illustrated what this looks like in discourse and how a groups primary values restrain their thinking brain. The elements of a root narrative give *narrativity*—in H. Porter Abbott's use of that term—to events that cannot otherwise be understood as moral issues. [63]

While every political story includes the four root narrative elements, there are various types of antagonists, power, harm, and protagonists. The types found in a text are

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[58] Bruner, *Actual Minds, Possible Worlds*, 11.
[59] See Plato, *Six Great Dialogues* and Kant, *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals*.
[60] Simmons, *Root Narrative Theory and Conflict Resolution*, 1.
[61] See Hume, "Morality and Natural Sentiment."
[62] Haidt, *The Righteous Mind*.
[63] Abbott, *The Cambridge Introduction to Narrative*.

what constitute its *moral logic*, or what is sometimes referred to as ideology. Differing

interpretations of events can be found in real time, revealing simultaneously how groups

in conflict are positioned in relation to each other and how they constitute their narrative

world. For example, this thesis is being written in the United States during the COVID-19

pandemic. Many Trump supporters have interpreted the pandemic through the moral

logic of the *libertarian* imagination, seeing health restrictions as a form of government

over-reach that must be overcome by refusing to obey. Many Biden voters view this

group as an ignorant mass who threaten the very stability of the nation with their

irresponsible behavior—this is the moral logic of the *securitarian* imagination. For many

supporters of Bernie Sanders, the most important lesson of the pandemic is that while the

poor were subject to horrific death, eviction, and the loss of livelihood through no fault of

their own, the economy worked only for Jeff Bezos, Elon Musk, and other wealthy

persons who netted profits in the billions. This is the moral logic of the *egalitarian*

imagination. And for many supporters of Kamala Harris and other democratic primary

candidates, the pandemic and economic crisis were but another example of how minority

lives still do not matter to a dominantly White culture that sits idly by while Black and

Indigenous persons suffer more than any other group. This is the moral logic of the

dignitarian imagination.

Each imagination includes its own protagonist (i.e., victim/hero) and injustice.
The victim/hero of the securitarian imagination is the nation or society, and the injustice
is physical deprivation. The victim/hero of the libertarian imagination is the (rational)
individual and the injustice is political coercion. The victim/hero of the egalitarian

imagination is the people, and the injustice is unfair competition. And the victim/hero of the dignitarian imagination is the undaunted outgroup and the injustice is cultural disrespect. The securitarian, libertarian, egalitarian, and dignitarian imaginations relate to the values of security, liberty, equality, and dignity, and are what Simmons considers primary root narratives. Within each imagination are three secondary root narratives, each is its own moral universe with the power to mine meaning from raw events. Each secondary root narrative contains its own unique combination of antagonists, and abusive power. It could be argued that these are what Cobb calls "the evaluate point of the story" what Aristotle calls "ethos,"[64] and are what I occasionally refer to in this thesis as "moral logics."

Table 1 Imaginations, Values, and Secondary Root Narratives

Imagination	Primary Value	Root Narratives
Securitarian	Security	Defense, Unity, Stability
Libertarian	Liberty	Consent, Property, Merit
Egalitarian	Equality	Reciprocity, Nation, Accountability
Dignitarian	Dignity	Recognition, Liberation, Inclusion

What root narrative theory allows the researcher to do is understand how various groups are finding moral meaning in unfolding events, and how they are positioning each other within discourse. In my view, some root narratives structures are natural enemies. The egalitarian "Nation" story is a natural enemy to the dignitarian "Recognition" story. The former often focuses on what makes the majority normal and natural, accuses the

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[64] Sara Cobb, *Speaking of Violence*, 64; See Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*.

other of being abnormal or unnatural. In this mode there is a proclivity to deny the outgroup's victimhood and cast the majority as the victim of their oppression.[65] This is the antithesis of the dignitarian Recognition story which casts the undaunted outgroup as the victim of the majority's bigotry.[66] A group's root narratives do not have to be natural enemies for them to be in conflict. Theoretically, even similar root narratives can influence conflict if the communities disagree on who is performing the roles of antagonist and protagonist. For example, if Latter-day Saints and Ex-Mormons both told Dignitarian "Liberation" stories, but one thought the antagonist was "secular government" and the other "religious government," this could reasonably be a point of conflict. The point here is that comparing the root narratives of both communities within context provides important insights into the conflict between them.

This thesis finds the conflict between the Church and Ex-Mormons in the tension between the impetus to meet the salvific/physical needs of the Latter-day Saints on the one hand, and the socio-structural marginalization of outgroups on the other. While this study finds variation in focus groups of believers, undecided persons, and disbelievers, the Church's leadership and Ex-Mormons show competing narratives wherein each group's victim/hero is the other's villain. By analyzing the root narratives of both communities, we can understand each group on its own terms. This will allow us

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[65] After the rise and fall of Nazism in the 20th century, Nation narratives are often equivocated with bigotry and have perhaps been uncommon since. For a contemporary example of a clear "Nation" root narrative I suggest reading the Serbian politician Bosko Obradovic's speech "Where are the Rights of the Majority?"
[66] As Simmons notes, Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* and Ta-Nehisi Coates *Between the World and Me* are two clear examples of a "Recognition" story (Simmons 64, 187).

Table 2 Primitive Sentences: Twelve Secondary Root Narratives[67]

	Antagonist Function		Protagonist Function	
	Character Element	Plot Element	Plot Element	Character Element
	Antagonist	Abusive Power	Injustice	Protagonist
Defense	Foreigners	use armed violence	to create physical deprivation	in the State
Unity	Elites	use bargaining power	to create physical deprivation	in the State
Stability	Majorities	use biased folkways	to create physical deprivation	in the State
Consent	Governments	use force of law	to create political coercion	of the Individual
Property	Majorities	use biased folkways	to create political coercion	of the Individual
Merit	Foreigners	use armed violence	to create political coercion	of the Individual
Reciprocity	Elites	use bargaining power	to create unfair competition	for the People
Nation	Foreigners	use armed violence	to create unfair competition	for the People
Accountability	Governments	use force of law	to create unfair competition	for the People
Recognition	Majorities	use biased folkways	to create cultural disrespect	of the Other
Liberation	Governments	use force of law	to create cultural disrespect	of the Other
Inclusion	Elites	use bargaining power	to create cultural disrespect	of the Other

(the researcher and the reader) to step into their narrative world and gain insights about what it is like to see the world as they see it—how they see themselves, the other, and the conflict. I use the understanding of each groups' intersubjective creation of meaning to inform my theory of deconversion as conflict and outline a hypothesis for its resolution.

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[67] This chart can be found in Simmons "Root Narrative Theory and Conflict Resolution" pg. 32.

Thesis Methodology and the Strengths and Limitations of the Data

While each study of Ex-Mormon exit narratives is valuable in revealing new understandings of Ex-Mormons, there is a dearth of narrative studies that seek to understand the moral systems of Ex-Mormons and few studies that compare Latter-day Saints to Ex-Mormons in any sense. These are large gaps in the literature, but they are also an opportunity to conduct meaningful and original research. This thesis seeks to fill some of these gaps. In Chapter two and Chapter three, I conduct a root narrative analysis—a theory-driven discourse analysis[68] that offers a glimpse into what Bruner refers to as the "narrative world" of the other.[69] This analysis produces two interrelated products. First, the *root narrative profile*, a quantitative measurement of which root narratives are present in the discourse and the values they indicate. Second, the *moral system*, a qualitative consideration of when particular root narratives are used, how they are used, and their similarities / differences to related political stories. This involves understanding not only the evaluative points of their stories, but how the articulation of these points reveals values, positionality, character roles, and the nexus of a speaker's moral beliefs. It involves evaluative points, how a point is connected to a nexus of other points, and how this ideological nexus works to unite a community, justify action, and interpret events. Chapters one, two, and three present an understanding of each communities' moral system thorough enough to be actionable for the purposes of intergroup understanding and conflict resolution.

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[68] See Johnny Saldaña, *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers*.
[69] Bruner, *Actual Minds, Possible Worlds*.

Within the methodology of this thesis, there is a tension between collecting data that is representative but also manageable. Because coding is a long process, there is a limit to how much data can be analyzed. One way to manage this tension is to limit the study to *representative discursive objects*, or rather, texts that represent a group's ideology. For example, in his article, "Struggle and Martyrdom" Simmons discussed the conflict between the Eritrean Government and the international community using root narrative theory. His dataset included ten of the Eritrean President's yearly Martyr's Day speeches, and ten of Human Rights Watch's yearly reports on Eritrea. Both data sets were official representations of the institutions in question.[70] Simmons' methodology is an apt way to characterize the root narrative differences between conflicting communities while maintaining a manageable dataset. Following Simmons' methodology, this thesis analyzes the discourse of both communities in their premier ritualistic gathering places. However, along with the communities' representative discourse I add focus group interviews consisting of members from each community, triangulate the datasets, and code them both with Simmons' theory-driven codes.

First, I collected representative texts from both communities. Chapter two includes a mixed-method root narrative analysis of President Russel M. Nelson's bi-annual General Conference remarks from April 2019, October 2019, and April 2020. General Conference is a ritualistic event that occurs each April and October wherein Church leaders speak for two days and two nights. Latter-day Saints are instructed to come with opens hearts, ready to receive their own revelation from God. As the leader of

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[70] Simmons, "Struggle and Martyrdom."

the Church, President Nelson is believed to be a prophet, seer, and revelator, and is considered to be God's chosen mouthpiece on earth. Thus, President Nelson not only gives us a representative sample of Latter-day Saint discourse, he is the embodiment of Mormon thought itself. In Chapter two I present the root narrative profile and moral system of President Nelson and, by extension, the Church as an institution.

While the Church is a hierarchical organization with a centralized leader, Ex-Mormons are an unorganized community that converse largely within disembodied and anonymous online gatherings.[71] The r/exmormon Reddit page is host to the largest community of Ex-Mormons—197,000 members at the time of writing. Reddit's filters allow users to organize posts by popularity. On Reddit there are two kinds of votes: up-votes and down-votes. And while Reddit's point algorithm is a guarded secret, top posts are a ratio of up-votes and down-votes that filter popular posts to the top of the page while limiting controversial posts. Because Reddit's algorithm gives critics some degree of veto power in a post's popularity, the most popular posts are not necessarily those with the most up votes—r/exmormon is not a winner-take all democratic system of popularity but a kind of consensus democracy, though the exact degree of required consensus is unknown. Unlike the Church's dataset, the Ex-Mormon's data has no institutional legitimacy because there is no official institution. Instead, the Ex-Mormon dataset is representative because it was democratically selected by the largest community of Ex-Mormons. At the time of data collection, the top post had nearly 25,000 up-votes. Due to the high number of posts between 8-9,000 I cut the dataset off at posts with 9,000 up-

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[71] Avance, "Constructing Religion in the Digital Age."

votes leaving me with 27 posts total. In Chapter three I present a mixed-method root

narrative analysis of these posts, as well as the moral systems of Ex-Mormon community.

The data analyzed in chapters two and three differ in type but are comparable for

the purposes of root narrative coding. Both are representative texts from the premier

ritualistic gathering places of each community. As such, they are settings that reflect the

peculiarity of each community. Nelson's speeches represent the Church because he is the

premier authority of Church thought. The most popular posts on the largest community of

Ex-Mormons are democratically representative of a community that has no official

organization or leaders. The data from both groups are coded using the same root

narrative coding scheme to understand a) the moral systems the Church and b) its former

members, as well as c) the ideological differences between them and d) how they position

each other in discourse. While the dataset serves the purposes of this thesis, these two are

not comparable in a variety of other senses. General Conference and r/exmormon are

both the premier gathering places of these communities, but each setting is regulated by

different rules that govern interaction in their context. Conference includes long

speeches, and only occurs for four days and four nights each year. Only the First

Presidency, the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, and invited speakers contribute to the

discourse. r/exmormon is regulated by Reddit policies, the community's own policies and

the volunteer moderators who enforce them. But within the confines of these rules,

anyone is allowed to post about anything related to Ex-Mormons. While these two

datasets are comparable for root narrative coding, they may not be comparable for other

kinds of research.

Furthermore, neither Nelson's discourse nor the r/exmormon page are necessarily representative of both communities as a whole. Mormonism is a large and diverse tradition, with differences in belief across time, space, and member. Nelson may represent the Church as an institution, but the membership is thought-diverse. While the r/exmormon page is the largest community of Ex-Mormons, it is likely that Ex-Mormons outside r/exmormon vary from those within it. Reddit users tend to be more educated, more politically liberal, poorer, with slightly more White persons than the general U.S. population.[72] When designing this research, I began following the r/exmormon page. In my anecdotal experience, the culture of the community seems to tilt toward non-religious and liberal Ex-Mormon thought. According to Reiss's study, agnostics, atheists, and those who believe "nothing in particular" only make up 45% of the Ex-Mormons.[73] While I cannot verify the religious or political affiliation of any Redditor, I argue it is likely secular and politically liberal Ex-Mormons are over-represented in the dataset.

Reiss's research has shown that only 40% of millennial Mormons strongly agree with the LDS Church's 2015 position that gay marriage is apostasy and differ with older generations of Mormons in a variety of ways.[74] This suggests that while President Nelson's discourse represent the Church's official positions, there are likely important differences in thought between LDS leadership and its members. Furthermore, I find Cragun's argument compelling and suspect there may be relevant differences between the vocal minority of Ex-Mormons and the nonvocal majority who leave quietly. In an effort

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[72] Shatz, "Fast, Free, and Targeted."
[73] Riess, *The Next Mormons*, 221.
[74] Riess, 144.

to account for these differences, this thesis adds a second dataset of focus-group interviews.

In Chapter four I present a root narrative analysis of focus-group interview data from five focus groups: two of believing Latter-day Saints, one of undecided Latter-day Saints, and two of Ex-Mormons. These participants were recruited through a purposive snowball data collection method, an appropriate way to find research participants in an otherwise inaccessible community.[75] Because I am from Utah and have many friends and family members in both groups, I posted on Instagram asking for help recruiting. About a dozen contacts responded to my post and agreed to help me recruit. They either sent me contact information of people who came to mind or posted on their own pages and invited their followers to reach out to me if they were interested. This quickly yielded 40 willing participants, the majority of which were Ex-Mormons who reached out to me personally.

From one post on my Instagram and around seven reposts from friends and family, I found enough participants for two Ex-Mormon interviews and one Latter-day Saint interview. I interpreted this discrepancy in two ways. First, because the various calls for participants included both communities, Latter-day Saints may have been apprehensive to participate. Second, during recruitment and the interview process, I had a sense that Ex-Mormons want to be understood. To make up for a shortage of LDS participants, I reached out to the moderators of the r/latterdaysaint Subreddit who gave

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[75] See Robson, *Real World Research*, 274-276 for more information on purposive and other types of non-probability sampling.

me permission to recruit on their page. The second LDS interview consisted exclusively of participants from r/latterdaysaint.

During recruitment I had a friend reach out to me about the parameters of the study and asked whether I needed undecided participants, or participants who felt they were neither in nor out of the Church. I had originally designed the study with the Latter-day Saint and Ex-Mormon dichotomy in mind. But after our conversation I decided to add a fifth focus-group of undecided persons. While I had refrained from including people I knew personally into the focus-groups I decided to make an exception for the Undecided group.[76] As Hinderaker and O'Connor found, the Ex-Mormon deconversion process is done primarily in secret.[77] I was not confident I could find transitioning or otherwise undecided persons. For this reason, I decided to include a focus group of two undecided couples I knew personally.

Due to the nature of snowball recruiting methods, these focus groups are non-probability samples. And while I do present quantitative measurements of their root narrative profiles, these should not be considered as quantitatively representative of the communities in question. However, each focus-group in this study provides unique access to certain LDS, Ex-Mormon, and undecided demographic groups. In Latter-day Saint Focus Group #1 (LDS1), there were five millennial female participants and one male generation X participant. While each participant in LDS1 show some unique codes,

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[76] There was also a participant in first Latter-day Saint focus group who I had met on several occasions, but who I had been out of contact with for about a decade. Due to our limited contact, I decided to include him in the focus group. Aside from this participant and those in the Undecided group, I had never met any participant prior to the recruitment process.
[77] Hinderaker and O'Connor, "The Long Road Out."

there were stark differences between millennial females and the generation X male. In Latter-day Saint Focus Group #2 (LDS2) there were five males and one female participant, all of whom were millennials and recruited from Reddit. LDS2 was a highly educated group and consisted mostly of participants from the social sciences and humanities. Ex-Mormon Focus Group #1 (EX1) consisted of six millennial female participants, two of which were from the LGBTQ+ community. Ex-Mormon Focus Group #2 (EX2) included one male and one female participant from the LGBTQ+ community. As a focus group consisting exclusively of members of the LGBTQ+ community, EX2 offers unique perspectives about the inclusion of LGBTQ+ persons in the Church, which has become an important issue both within the Church and between Latter-day Saints and Ex-Mormons. [78] The Undecided Focus Group (UD1) included two young couples, one with newborn children and the other with a young toddler and consisted of two male and two female participants from the millennial generation. UD1 offers unique perspectives about the liminal spaces between the communities, as well as how this space creates tension for new parents considering how to raise a young family.

Ideology and moral discourse are best understood in context. The parables of Jesus of Nazareth are much easier to understand when one has a grasp on first-century Jewish culture and the political context of Israel as an occupied nation. Friedrich Engels and Karl Marx's *Communist Manifesto* is better understood when considered alongside the brutal working conditions during Europe's industrial revolution. One of the strengths of this study is its consideration of both Ex-Mormons and Latter-day Saints. The Church,

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[78] Riess, *The Next Mormons*, 17.

its current members, and its former members are each better understood when considered alongside the other. This is beneficial both in the consideration of the conflict between them and the context of their moral systems. Both datasets are coded using the same theoretical coding scheme, allowing for quantitative and qualitative insights into each community respectively as well as their relationships to each other.

In Chapter four, I treat focus group interviews as a text and only consider the ideologically salient data and *positionality* (i.e., how each group positions the other in discourse). However, some interview questions related directly to the quality of conflict, the pathways to resolution between members and former members, the deconversion process, and the value of faith. In Chapter five, I shift from being a 'moral grammarian' and become a 'grounded theorist.' I consider participant responses without root narrative codes and use both participant input and the literatures on deconversion, conflict resolution, and the Ex-Mormon experience to argue for a theory of deconversion *as* conflict and propose general guidelines for a theory of deconversion-conflict resolution.

Conclusion

Both datasets collected for this thesis were analyzed with a qualitative coding method that uses the theory-driven themes found in Solon Simmons' root narrative theory.[79] These include character and plot elements of both antagonists and protagonists. As Simmons argues, the combination of plot elements "the antagonist uses abusive power to create injustice for the protagonist" is what he calls a root narrative and is the primitive

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[79] Robson, *Real World Research*, 479; Simmons, *Root Narrative Theory and Conflict Resolution*.

grammar of the moral imagination.[80] In other words, you cannot have a political story without these plot elements. By discovering what kinds of antagonists, powers abused, injustices caused, and protagonists found in the data, I discover a) the ideological nexus of the Church and its believing, undecided, and former members; b) how these groups position each other in discourse, c) fundamental differences between each group and d) I explore how this relates to the conflict between them.

This thesis hopes to make a contribution to narrative research, as well as the study of conflict and deconversion. This study may also contribute to the advancement of research methodology itself. Simmons' *Root Narrative Theory and Conflict Resolution* was published only a few months before I began collecting data and few are trained to use its themes to conduct research. This thesis is the first time the theory has been used to code focus group interviews, or otherwise used in a physical laboratory setting with live participants. Thus, this thesis both presents original findings and hopes to serve as an advancement of research methodology itself.

In this chapter I have argued that conflict is complex, and that there is a constant tension between complex realities and the coherency of theory. Because of this tension, any coherent theory of conflict or conflict resolution must be an oversimplification of realities. This is true of both theoretical coherence as well as actionability. Conflict is a word used to describe an infinite interplay of incalculable variables, and yet we must invent coherent theories to resolve it. My theory of deconversion as conflict is no exception. In this chapter I have introduced this theory, the purposes of this thesis, as well

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[80] Simmons, *Root Narrative Theory and Conflict Resolution*, 24.

as a summary of each remaining chapter. I have also given an introduction to root narrative theory, discussed the current literatures on Ex-Mormon narratives and the disciplinary intersection of narrative and conflict resolution. In doing so I have identified several gaps in the literature this thesis seeks to fill and presented a multimethod research design in the social constructionist tradition to do so. Lastly, I have discussed the strengths and weaknesses of this thesis' research methodology and considered both its strengths and limitations.

While this thesis is relevant for the study of conflict analysis, narrative studies, institutional exit, deconversion, religious conflict, and conflict resolution, the value of this study may also lie in its ability to help real people understand one another. As Aeschylus said in First Century Greece "In war, the first casualty is truth."[81] In the conflict between Latter-day Saints and Ex-Mormons, it may be more accurate to say that in deconversion, the first casualty is friendship. The intent behind this research is the reconciliation of damaged relationships. Thus, perhaps the most valuable contribution of this thesis lies in its capacity to foster inter-communal understanding of each other and the deconversion process.

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[81] Qtd. In Rubenstein, *Resolving Structural Conflicts*, 7.

CHAPTER 2. SECURITARIAN SALVATION AND THE MORAL SYSTEM OF PRESIDENT NELSON

As the President of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Russel M. Nelson is considered a prophet, seer, and revelator—God's literal mouthpiece on earth. And while the Church does not espouse a doctrine of infallible leadership, it is difficult to understate the importance of Nelson's position. Latter-day Saints believe that the scriptural canon is open, and that God speaks to humankind through President Nelson just as other Abrahamic religionists believe God spoke through Moses to the Hebrews. Nelson is not merely a representation of Latter-day Saint thought; he is the embodiment of it. Latter-day Saints gather biannually for General Conference (Conference / GC), an event where President Nelson, the First Presidency, the Twelve Apostles, and other Church leaders speak to the Church and to the world at large for two nights and two days. Attending GC is considered a duty for the Saints who are invited to pray beforehand and ask God to teach them personally.[82]

In the attempt to find representative discourse of Latter-day Saints, a regularly occurring event wherein the central authority figure speaks to the Church at large could not be more ideal. GC is the ritualistic gathering place for the Latter-day Saints. This chapter includes a root narrative analysis of 1.5 years of Nelson's remarks, or three GCs. Where relevant, the remarks of other Apostles, scriptures, and historical quotes are also cited. To fully and charitably explicate Nelson's moral system, I use the terms such as:

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[82] lds.org, "What Is the General Conference in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints?"

"salvific agency," "salvific co-equality," "spiritual nation," and "spiritual contract." These are not terms used in Latter-say Saint thought but are necessary for the reader to distinguish between some secular notions of freedom, feminism, and nationhood, and similar (or dissimilar) notions within Nelson's securitarian theology.

This chapter is a glimpse into the narrative world of the Latter-day Saint prophet and includes quantitative measurements of his semantic narrative structure (i.e., root narratives) and a qualitative comparison of Nelson's narratives and other well-known thinkers that utilize the same narrative modes. These comparisons allow Nelson's moral system to be illustrated in greater detail. This includes what Nelson believes, how those beliefs are tied to a nexus of other beliefs, and how this moral nexus works to interpret events, justify certain actions, and unite a peculiar people.

As Simmons suggests, "each of the twelve manifestations of the root narratives is a container large enough to explain entire worlds, all the while ignoring the implications of the others."[83] The vast majority of Nelson's speech consists of Stability narratives. The uniqueness of Nelson's discourse lies not in the fact that there is a dominant root narrative, but the degree to which it is dominant. As mentioned in the last chapter, not all content is codable in root narrative coding. Only moral discourse is codable, and in this dataset that comprised 36.35% of the text. As seen in Chart 3, the Stability root narrative comprised 26.61% of the total discourse, and only 9.74% for the other eleven root narratives. As seen in Chart 1, Stability is the dominant root narrative in every major address except "Opening the Heavens for Help", and two of the five minor addresses

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[83] Simmons, *Root Narrative Theory and Conflict Resolution*, 90.

such as introductory and closing remarks. And while the Unity root narrative was dominant in "Opening the Heavens for Help," Stability was a close second. Major speeches spanned a number of topics including the restoration of the gospel, the Aaronic priesthood, the humanitarian work of the Church, personal revelation, obedience, etc. These speeches spanned a period of one and a half years and three General Conferences. This included all of 2019 to April 2020 when the world experienced rapid and radical changes due to the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent financial crisis. Yet, Nelson utilized the moral logic of the Stability narrative regardless of his topic or the societal changes occurring around him. From this data set it appears as if the securitarian imagination generally and the Stability root narrative specifically comprise much of President Nelson's narrative world.

Stability: Spiritual/Physical Security and the Hobbesian Covenant

The Stability root narrative is an expression of the securitarian imagination—a form of communitarian logic casting the kingdom, civilization, or nation as protagonist. Depending on whether the narrative puts more focus on the antagonist (function) or protagonist (function), it is a story of "majorities [using] biased folkways to create physical deprivation in the state" or a story of "practicing virtue creates justice for the protagonist." The moral logic of this mode has been articulated most famously and clearly by thinkers such as Thomas Hobbes in the West and Confucius in the East. But like all root narratives, it is not only found in philosophical texts, but within any political or moral discourse. A father discussing the importance of proper handwashing in

preventing the spread of disease or an economist citing the tragedy of the commons

dilemma are likely speaking in the Stability mode.
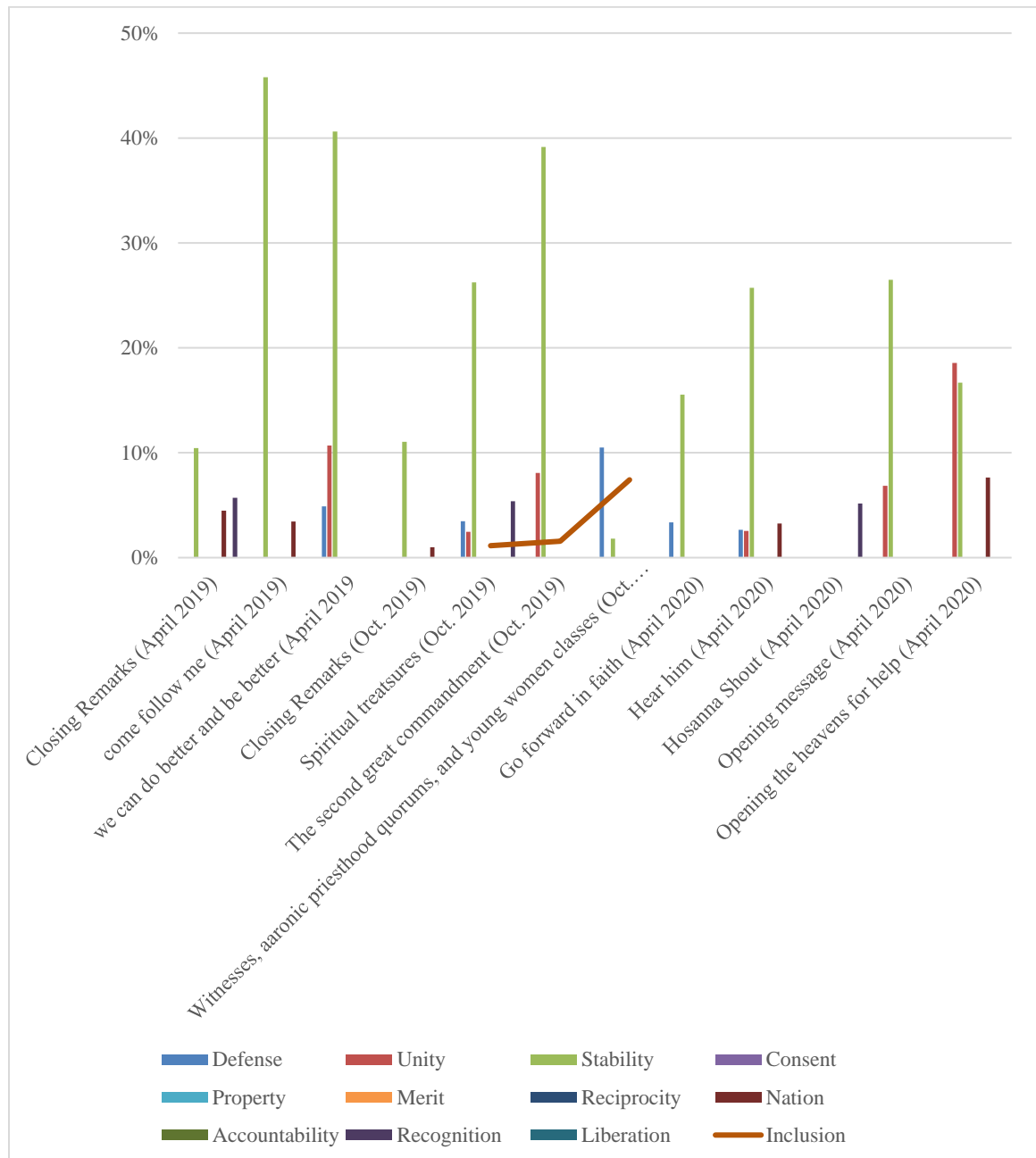
Figure 1. President Nelson Root Narrative Profile by Speech
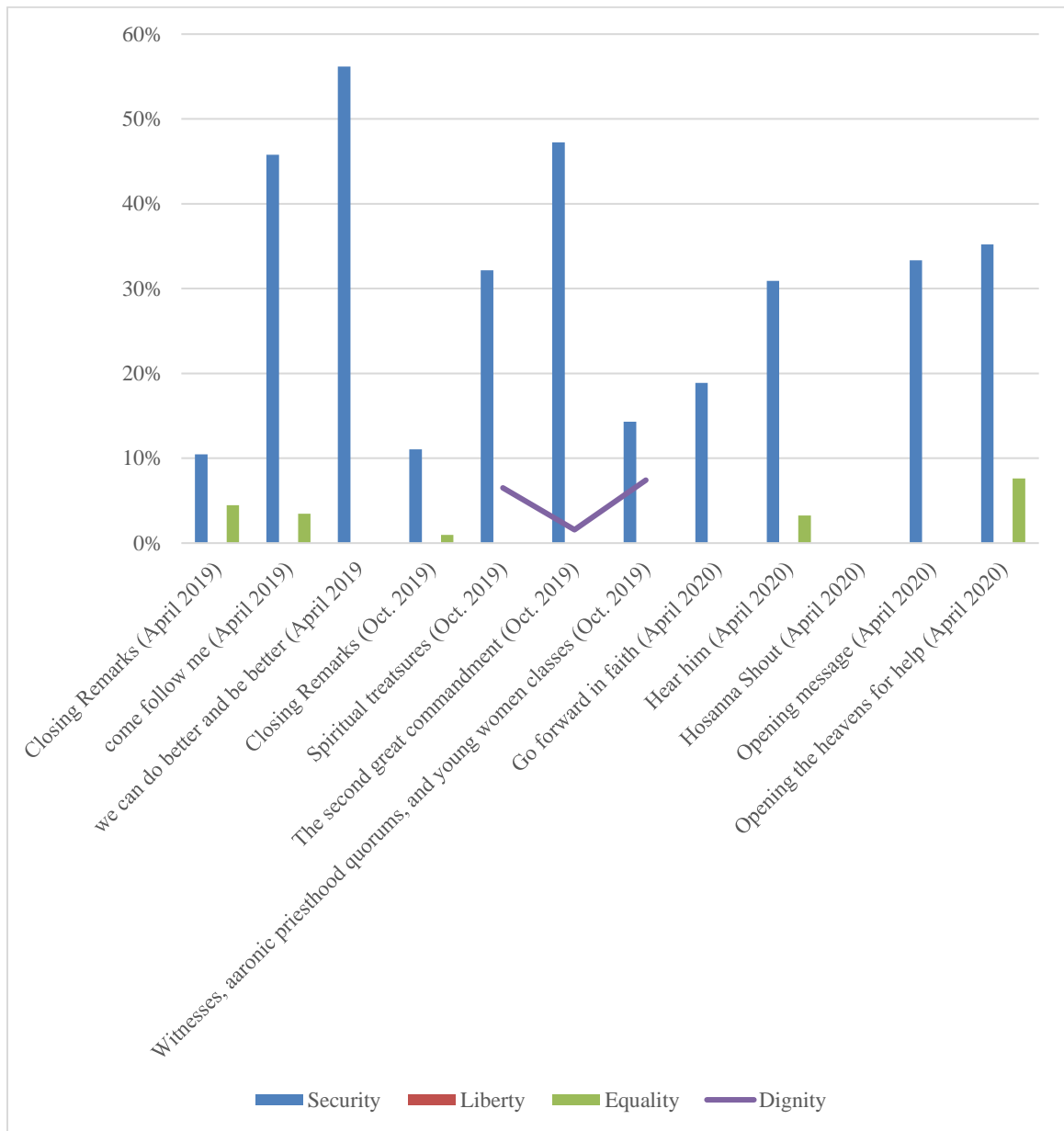
Figure 2. President Nelson Values by Speech

When Nelson leaves Stability and speaks through the grammar of another root narrative, he often returns quickly and forcefully, almost as if other modes exist to add flavor to the story's main ingredient. For example, in his October 2019 address, "The

Second Great Commandment," Nelson briefly leaves the Stability mode and enters the

Unity and Inclusion modes.

> Since that time, Latter-day Saint Charities has provided more than two billion
>
> dollars in aid to assist those in need throughout the world. This assistance is
>
> offered to recipients regardless of their church affiliation, nationality, race, sexual
>
> orientation, gender, or political persuasion. (Nelson, The Second Great
>
> Commandment, October 2019)

Here we see Latter-day Saint Charities (Nation) using two billion dollars (bargaining

power) to anyone in need, thereby overcoming both cultural disrespect (Inclusion) and

physical deprivation (Unity). But, just as quickly as he enters Unity and Inclusion, Nelson

shifts back to Stability.

> That is not all. To assist members of the Lord's Church in distress, we love and
>
> live the ancient law of the fast. We go hungry to help others who are hungry. One
>
> day each month, we go without food and donate the cost of that food (and more)
>
> to help those in need. (Nelson, The Second Great Commandment, October 2019)

The problem of hunger (physical deprivation) in the Lord's Church (nation) is solved by

obedience to the ancient law of the fast (right behavior). As an American in 2019, Nelson

seems to have at least an intuitive understanding of the moral grammar of society

generally. A little over a year after this speech, Joseph R. Biden won the U.S. Presidential election while speaking a similar discursive combination of securitarian and dignitarian values. But, while Nelson occasionally acknowledges these moral grammars in discourse, he almost always returns quickly and forcefully back to the Stability mode.

That being said, Nelson's Stability discourse includes adaptations that are perhaps unique, and may relate to Mormonism's libertarian roots as an American religion. At times his iteration of the Stability mode is quite straightforward and fits squarely within Simmons' qualifications.

> The Book of Mormon chronicles the classic rise and fall of two major civilizations. Their history demonstrates how easy it is for a majority of the people to forget God, reject warnings of the Lord's prophets, and seek power, popularity, and pleasures of the flesh. Repeatedly, past prophets have declared 'great and marvelous things unto the people, which they did not believe.' It is no different in our day. (Nelson, Hear Him, April 2020)

In this quote we see a clear Stability narrative including two major civilizations (nations) engaging in wrong behavior (biased folkways) that led to their downfall (physical deprivation). While the securitarian imagination is usually a communitarian form of thought, Nelson occasionally shifts focus to the individual making it difficult to ascertain whether the protagonist is the Individual or the Church. Casting the Individual as protagonist is usually an element of the libertarian imagination. Given the rest of the

narrative structure, this would mean Nelson's stories are similar in structure to the libertarian Property root narrative. As illustrated below, Stability and Property share the same antagonist function, but differ in the protagonist function.

Stability: majorities use biased folkways to create physical deprivation in the State

Property: majorities use biased folkways to create political coercion of the individual

When the protagonist is the State, or rather the Church, I coded "Stability." But when Nelson borrowed the Property narrative's protagonist I also coded "Stability." At first glance this may seem an arbitrary decision since Nelson's mixture seems to fit equally within either narrative code—having three of four elements of each root narrative. But this decision was not arbitrary. Despite borrowing the libertarian protagonist, Nelson's moral grammar fits within the Stability mode in ways irreducible to its character element. While I will discuss each of these in more detail below, Nelson's speech stays true to the characteristics and feel of the Stability mode in three ways. First, Nelson virtually never discusses political coercion, the fundamental injustice in the libertarian imagination. Rather, through a theological conflation of the physical and spiritual, Nelson is nearly always discussing physical deprivation which is a central feature of the securitarian imagination. Second, Nelson often obscures the antagonist, focusing instead on behavior. This is perhaps a natural tendency in the Stability mode.

Third, Nelson's paternalistic focus on meeting the basic needs—in this case the spiritual/physical needs—of humankind is a characteristic of the Stability mode. This is also emblematic of many humanitarian NGO stories, which are often Stability narratives.[84]

Nelson gives such a high focus on right behavior and wrong behavior (i.e., biased folkways) that the antagonist is obscured and is more often implicit in the text than explicit. As Simmons describes, "what marks this story structure as distinct from the Defense narrative is that there is often no external enemy asserted or implied in the Stability narrative. The cause of the suffering is disorganization itself."[85] Generally speaking, there seems to be a propensity in the Stability mode to talk about the biased folkways themselves, rather than those performing them. And as Simmons notes, this may be a consequence of the lack of external enemies within this mode. If the story notes a particular group of people engaging in wrong behavior, it is much easier to transform them into a kind of outsider the nation needs protection from. But this would not be a Stability narrative but a Defense narrative wherein the nation needs protection from a particular group. In the Stability mode, 'we' are antagonist and protagonist depending on our behavior. In Nelsons' narratives, the cause of suffering is not any particular group, but wrong behavior itself. Or rather, behavior that violates God's commandments be they ancient or contemporary. Wrong behavior cuts us off from the presence and protection of God, leaving us to face a cold and brutal world alone.

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[84] Simmons, 106
[85] Simmons, 98

Those of us who experienced the COVID-19 Pandemic are probably quite familiar with this since Stability is one of the common narrative modes through which the pandemic has been storied. When discussing the COVID-19, doctors and journalists often speak of the "biased folkways" of not wearing masks, not social distancing, and not washing one's hands more often than those engaging in this bad behavior. The wrong behaviors themselves are explicitly mentioned while those engaging in wrong behaviors are implied—they are people, out there, somewhere, creating disorder by not following the rules, thereby threatening the safety and stability of the nation. Nelson's stories are similar; The antagonist is wrong behavior itself. Those engaging in wrong behavior are implied (behavior requires an actor), but rarely mentioned explicitly.
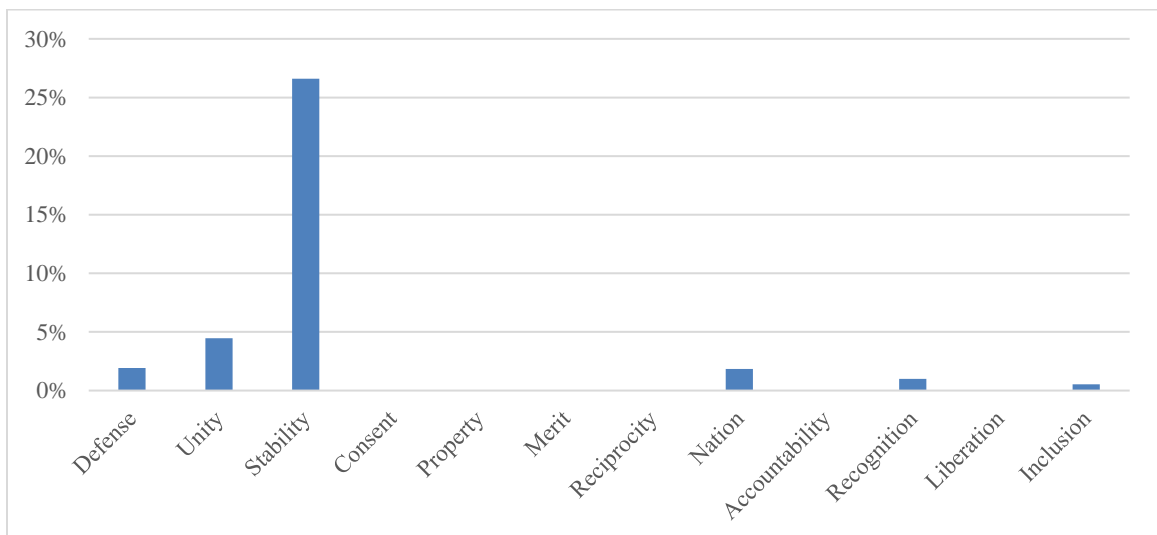
Figure 3. President Nelson Root Narrative Profile

The propensity to discuss behavior rather than antagonists is less common in the Property mode. While Stability and Property share a common antagonist, the latter is often more explicit in who is included in "the majority." Take for example the reactionary arguments against "political correctness." The antagonist is often clear--it is the *social justice warrior* whose biased folkways of political correctness coerce individuals into silence or ideological conformity. Similarly, and perhaps most famously is James Madison's argument against the tyranny of the majority in *The Federalist Papers*.[86] In Madison's story the antagonist is explicitly mentioned and regularly referred to. It is the rabble, "the majority" who would use democracy to redistribute (i.e., coerce or steal) the wealth of the opulent minority. Nelson's antagonist and antagonist function share more in common with Garrett Hardin's *Tragedy of the Commons* where the villain of the story is not the majority engaging in coercive behavior, but the absence of order within a common space.[87]

While in the Stability mode, Nelson is often speaking as a kind of humanitarian whose concern for the children of God is sincere. Much like the humanitarian stories found in the reports of non-governmental organizations (NGOs), Nelson spends much of his speeches discussing basic human needs and how to satisfy them. However, while Nelson discusses physical death, pain, and material needs, he spends most of his time discussing spiritual needs. At first glance, many readers may be tempted to see the physical and spiritual as separate and distinct just as many Westerners apply a conceptual

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[86] Hamilton et al., *The Federalist Papers*.
[87] Hardin, "The Tragedy of the Commons."

demarcation line between "religion" and the rest of social life (Armstrong, 2014). But Nelson's discourse suggests he does not share this distinction. Spiritual needs are tangible and affect the physical wellbeing of individuals. Here is one example:

> Though today's restrictions relate to a virulent virus, life's personal trials stretch far beyond this pandemic. Future trials could result from an accident, a natural disaster, or an unexpected personal heartache. How can we endure such trials? The Lord has told us that "if ye are prepared ye shall not fear." Of course, we can store our own reserves of food, water, and savings. But equally crucial is our need to fill our personal spiritual storehouses with faith, truth, and testimony. (Nelson, Opening Message, April 2020)

While the connections between the physical and spiritual are not wholly considered in Nelson's speeches, it is clear that these two are amalgamated in some sense. This is not unique to Nelson, but rather a theological position dating to Joseph Smith Jr., the founder of the Church who brought this amalgamation into canon.

> Wherefore, verily I say unto you that all things unto me are spiritual, and not at any time have I given unto you a law which was temporal; neither any man, nor the children of men; neither Adam, your father, whom I created. Behold, I gave unto him that he should be an agent unto himself; and I gave unto him commandment, but no temporal commandment gave I unto him, for my

commandments are spiritual; they are not natural nor temporal, neither carnal nor sensual.[88]

While the characteristics of Nelson's humanitarianism are perhaps distinct from secular humanitarian thinking, both of their moral logics adhere to a common root narrative structure. Nelson is in essence a spiritual humanitarian, a shepherd, wholly focused and devoted to meeting the spiritual needs of his spiritual nation. This is another reason for categorizing his narratives as Stability rather than Property. As Simmons notes, humanitarian NGOs often speak within the Stability mode when articulating the problems they work to ameliorate.[89] Nelson is not *liberating* the Saints from a spiritual tyranny, he is *protecting* them from spiritual/physical deprivation.

Understanding the equation of physical and spiritual needs is important to understanding Nelson's moral logic and, by extension, the politics of the Latter-day Saint community. Because physical and spiritual needs are coterminous, both are required for wellbeing. Hence passages such as "behold, I say unto you, wickedness never was happiness."[90] The message is concise and forceful: wrong behavior is not compatible with a fulfilling life. Furthermore, because the world is not aware of all God's commandments, wrong behavior is rampant and often considered normal outside the Church. By this logic, evangelist missionary work *is* humanitarian work; spiritual needs

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[88] Doctrine & Covenants 29:34-35.
[89] Simmons, *Root Narrative Theory and Conflict Resolution*, 106.
[90] Alma 41:10.

are basic needs, and, as will be discussed in later chapters, leaving the faith is a threat to a person's wellbeing.

Nelson's moral logic is patently similar to other securitarian thinkers like Thomas Hobbes and Confucius. For example, Hobbes considered the state to be the foundation of peace and the absence of the state to be the very presence of violence, hence his description of life outside of society as "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short."[91] For Hobbes, the leviathan offers protection from a state of nature. In Nelson's moral logic, right behavior places one in a kind of society with the divine. Within this society God guarantees protection from a litany of physical and spiritual dangers. Protection from bodily and spiritual dangers is given in the form of promptings from the Holy Ghost, which warns one of dangers, and is difficult to hear when a person is morally impure.[92] A number of behaviors work to increase sensitivity to the spirit such as sexual purity, abstaining from impure media and addictive substances, reading from the scriptural canon daily, attending Church services, and participating in temple rituals. Bodily health is promised when one obeys the dietary code called the word of wisdom found in *The Doctrine & Covenants* section 89, and when one obeys the law of the fast.[93] Those who keep the law of tithing by donating 10% of their income are promised that they "shall not be burned at his coming" as well as financial security throughout their lives.[94] In

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[91] Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 102; for Hobbes the presence of the state was not only the premise of peace, but also the litany of things we value within the state: culture, industry, knowledge, etc.

[92] On the Church's website it states, "as we strive to stay on the path that leads to eternal life, the Holy Ghost can guide us in our decisions and protect us from physical and spiritual danger" (Church of Jesus Christ, "Holy Ghost").

[93] *The Doctrine & Covenants 88:76.*

[94] *The Doctrine and Covenants 64:23.*

Nelson's speeches, the spiritual/physical protections for those who obey the commandments of God is a central focus.

> We have front-row seats to witness live what the prophet Nephi saw only in vision, that "the power of the Lamb of God" would descend "upon the covenant people of the Lord, who were scattered upon all the face of the earth; and they were armed with righteousness and with the power of God in great glory." You, my brothers and sisters, are among those men, women, and children whom Nephi saw. (Hear Him, April 2020).

> Our Father knows that when we are surrounded by uncertainty and fear, what will help us the very most is to hear His Son. Because when we seek to hear—truly hear—His Son, we will be guided to know what to do in any circumstance. (Hear Him, April 2020)

Just as being in society with the state provides protection in Hobbes' leviathan, community with the divine provides protection in Nelson's securitarian narratives and within Mormonism generally.

Nelson, like Hobbes, frames his understanding of right behavior squarely within contractualism. Entrance to Hobbes' nation-community is a social contract between the people and the State: the people agree to obey the laws, and the State agrees to protect them. Entrance into God's community (i.e., the Church) is a spiritual contract (i.e., a

covenant) between the individual and God: the person agrees to obey the laws, and God agrees to distribute protective blessings to them. In Nelson's words, "God's objective should be our objective. He wants His children to choose to return to Him, prepared, qualified, endowed, sealed, and faithful to covenants made in holy temples" (Closing Remarks, April 2019). Furthermore, both thinkers place the authority's ability to protect them within a notion of legitimacy. For Hobbes, as well as the contemporary securitarian thinker Steven Pinker, the state's ability to protect its citizens lies in its monopoly on the legitimate use of violence.[95] Even when they want to act violently, citizens are incentivized not to harm each other because the state will punish them in return. In Mormonism, what makes the Church God's true and living church is *priesthood authority*, the authority God gives to men to act in his name and, among other things, create legitimate binding contracts between humankind and God.[96] As stated in canon, "and verily I say unto you, that they who go forth, bearing these tidings unto the inhabitants of the earth, to them is power given to seal both on earth and in heaven, the unbelieving and rebellious."[97] In Nelson's discourse the Church functions as a spiritual leviathan with a monopoly on God's binding power—the power necessary for spiritual/physical safety.

Of course, to say Hobbes and Nelson are similar in their moral logic, contractualism, and reliance on notions of legitimacy is not to say they are similar in other ways. As an atheist, Hobbes' concerns are exclusively mortal. As the Latter-day

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[95] See Steven Pinker, *The Better Angels of Our Nature*.
[96] *The Doctrine and Covenants 110:13-16.*
[97] *The Doctrine and Covenants 1:8.*

Saint prophet, Nelson's concerns are primarily *eternal*, or rather, other-worldly. But within Nelson's theology is a securitarian salvation, a spiritual nation with a moral logic in common with Hobbes' leviathan. This is perhaps another reason Nelson's protagonist is both the Church and the individual member. In Nelson's Stability story, most covenants are between God and the individual, with the exception of the temple sealing which is between God and family. While maintaining the Old-Testament covenant logic between God and *Israel*, the Latter-day Saints conceive of God's people as a spiritual rather than a national community—a community without ethnic identifiers or national boundaries. Thus, while Nelson's dominant narrative is Stability, his conception of "nation," may be more libertarian than Hobbes'; a nation is more like a collection of individuals than a single cohesive unit. This may be why it is not always obvious whether Nelson's protagonist is the Church/Nation or the Individual, even while remaining in the Stability mode.

> Sometimes we speak almost casually about walking away from the world with its contention, pervasive temptations, and false philosophies. But truly doing so requires you to examine your life meticulously and regularly...As you embark upon and continue this lifelong process of consecrating your life to the Lord, the changes in your perspective, feelings, and spiritual strength will amaze you! (Nelson, Spiritual Treasures, October 2019)

What does it mean that Nelson stays almost exclusively within the Stability mode

and the securitarian imagination? Does this mean that Nelson's moral imagination is

limited to a single narrative world, or is the Mormon imagination itself contained, more

or less, within a single narrative world? Of course, these are not the only possibilities. As

Cobb notes, "anything that is said is regulated by the constitutive and regulative rules that

govern interaction in that context."[98] Like any context, GC mobilizes language and

stories toward preferred outcomes and relationships. Does Nelson restrict himself to

Stability narratives because the aims of GC are to motivate obedience to God's

commandments that Latter-day Saints believe foster wellbeing, stability, and exaltation?

That seems likely, but contextual regulation is more implicit than explicit. While it is true

that one of the explicit aims of GC is to uplift and inspire, and that Conference is a

regulated setting (like all settings), the regulations are not necessarily ideologically

salient. For example, there are no assigned topics for GC; speakers are assigned to speak,

but not told what to speak about. It is up to them to pray, receive revelation for

themselves, and speak to the body of the Church.[99] If Church authorities consistently feel

inspired to speak through the moral logic of securitarian thought, it is likely because they

see the world through the securitarian imagination since they are not overtly constrained

to do so.

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[98] Cobb, *Speaking of Violence*, 9.
[99] The Church of Jesus Christ, lds.org, "What Is the General Conference in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints?"

Defense, Unity, Stability: The Church's Individualism and Structuralism

In Latter-day Saint thought, the cause of suffering seems to be wrong behavior itself, those engaging in this behavior are implied, but rarely mentioned explicitly. Similarly, in Garret Hardin's *Tragedy of the Commons*, the cause of suffering is the lack of organization itself, those acting in a disorderly way are not the focus of the story. As an economist, Hardin is comfortable suggesting human behavior is caused by social and economic structures. Nelson, however, is not. The Saints have an ideological commitment to the principle of human agency—behavior is not caused but chosen, and with salvific consequences. Chosen behavior is the human side of the covenant with God. God makes a covenant with the individual, if the individual obeys his commandments, God keeps distributes spiritual/physical blessings to them. 'Caused' behavior disrupts the covenant logic. For example, take this well-known verse from the Book of Mormon:

> And the Messiah cometh in the fulness of time, that he may redeem the children
> of men from the fall. And because that they are redeemed from the fall they have
> become free forever, knowing good from evil; to act for themselves and not to be
> acted upon, save it be by the punishment of the law at the great and last day,
> according to the commandments which God hath given.[100]

This commitment may explain why Nelson's Stability narratives may read and feel differently than Stability stories like those of Hardin. Nelson's narratives are an

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[100] 2 Nephi 2:26

individualistic form of Stability that focus on chosen behaviors and excludes social, economic, political incentives and other structural elements that may otherwise explain chaos. In Nelson's discourse, there is an absence of structural thought despite the presence of theological incentives—blessings—to obey commandments. Harm is caused by individuals engaging in wrong behavior and only through right behavior can the world be made right.

The way we see the world has implications, and it is possible that seeing the world predominantly through the Stability narrative limits the moral realm to individual behavior while social-structures, power differentials, Church procedures, and hierarchies of value between persons are seen as amoral. If human beings are seen only as things that act—not things that are acted upon—then notions of structural violence, cultural violence, and the moral implications of socio-structural influences on human behavior may seem unintuitive since, in the Stability mode, structures and systems only bring order, peace, and salvation, and never oppression and violence.

The absence of structural thought is not limited to Nelson's discourse but can be demonstrated on occasions when accusations of structural violence are made against the Church itself. Shortly after the U.S. Supreme Court's Obergefell v. Hodges ruling that marriage is a fundamental right guaranteed to same-sex couples, the Church issued a policy change that categorized homosexual activity as a form of apostasy and prevented children whose parents were in same-sex marriages or co-habitations from being baptized until they were eighteen and had disavowed homosexual behavior as sinful. To many inside and outside the Church, this was seen as bigoted and spiteful. But Church leaders

saw the legalization of same-sex marriage as the onset of moral disorder and sought to

order the world through Church policy. In short, they interpreted the Supreme Court's

decision and their response to it through the moral logic of Stability. This can be seen in

Latter-day Saint Apostle Elder D. Todd Christofferson's explanation of the policy.

> With the Supreme Court's decision in the United States, there was a need for a
>
> distinction to be made between what may be legal and what may be the law of the
>
> Church and the law of the Lord and how we respond to that. So it's a matter of
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> being clear; it's a matter of understanding right and wrong; it's a matter of a firm
>
> policy that doesn't allow for question or doubt… We're not going to yield on our
>
> efforts to help people find what brings happiness, but we know sin does not. And
>
> so we're going to stand firm there because we don't want to mislead people.
>
> There's no kindness in misdirecting people and leading them into any
>
> misunderstanding about what is true, what is right, what is wrong, what leads to
>
> Christ and what leads away from Christ.[101]

The logic behind the policy was not to harm an oppressed group—though that

was a consequence—but to bring order to a newly disordered world. Viewing

homosexual acts as wrong was once common in the U.S, but after Obergefell v. Hodges,

there was a liminal space for moral reform. If heteronormative behavior is right behavior,

and spiritual/physical safety is contingent on right behavior, then harsh policies targeting

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[101] Newsroom, "Elder Christofferson."

LGB persons could be seen as both necessary and merciful. Christofferson continues, "so this policy originates out of that compassion. It originates from a desire to protect children in their innocence and in their minority years."

After significant pushback from groups in and out of the Church, the 2015 policy was rolled back in 2019. Yet even the logic behind the rollback was characteristically securitarian. When announcing the policy, Latter-day Saint Apostle Elder Dallin H. Oaks said:

> The very positive policies announced this morning should help affected families. In addition, our members' efforts to show more understanding, compassion and love should increase respect and understanding among all people of goodwill. We want to reduce the hate and contention so common today. We are optimistic that a majority of people — whatever their beliefs and orientations — long for better understanding and less contentious communications. That is surely our desire, and we seek the help of our members and others to attain it.[102]

The policy was written to bring order through right norms but rolling back the policy was also to bring order through right norms. In 2015 the biased folkway was homosexuality, in 2019 it was hate and contention. The change in policy did not bring a change in root narrative and did not bring a new understanding of structural forms of violence. Instead, the threat of one type of disorder—the normalization of homosexuality—was eclipsed by

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[102] Newsroom, "First Presidency Shares Messages From General Conference Leadership Session."

another type of disorder—hate and contention. While Oaks did note that families were affected by the enactment of the 2015 policy, it was indirect. Families were affected, but he does not mention by what or whom. The villain in the text is hate and contention itself, which can be overcome by virtuous people, both Latter-day Saint and other.

An absence of structuralism within Nelson's discourse does not imply structural changes are out of the question. Nelson has overseen considerable changes to the organizational structure of the Church such as decreasing the three-hour weekly Church service to two hours, and the dramatic shift away from the use of the word, "Mormon." Furthermore, religious institutions always adapt to changing socio-cultural environments and evolve over time much like any other institution.[103] But the reasoning behind structural changes within the Church may have more to do with delineating right and wrong behaviors than structural violence or cultural disrespect. Chaos and disorder are overcome by right behavior, and the role of the Church is to bring order by teaching right behavior. It is possible this reasoning extends back to the founding of Mormonism itself. In a conversation with Joseph Smith Jr., a member of the Illinois legislature asked, "how it was that he was enabled to govern so many people, and to preserve such perfect order; remarking…that it was impossible for them to do it anywhere else." Joseph Smith's response has become an aphorism in the Latter-Day Community, "I teach them correct principles, and they govern themselves."[104] Entrenchment within the Stability mode seems to remove social structures from moral consideration. And for this reason, it is

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[103] See Bellah, "Religious Evolution"; Wunn, "The Evolution of Religions."
[104] *Teachings of the Presidents of the Church: Joseph Smith*, 284.

possible that notions of structural and cultural violence are unintuitive to Latter-day Saints.

Nation: The Only True and Living Church

The Nation root narrative is an expression of the egalitarian imagination and is often associated with populist movements. The moral logic of this narrative places the people as its protagonist and foreigners as the antagonist: *Foreigners use armed violence to create unfair competition for the people*. This root narrative consisted of only 1.84% of Nelson's discourse and was always used when he talked about the Church in relation to other churches. Nelson's Nation discourse was perhaps tamed by never mentioning other churches explicitly, though just as he implied a protagonist when in the Stability mode, other churches were always implied in the Nation mode.

> I leave my love and blessing with you, assuring you that revelation continues in this, the Lord's Church. It will continue until "the purposes of God shall be accomplished, and the Great Jehovah shall say the work is done." I so bless you and bear my testimony that God lives! Jesus is the Christ! This is His Church. We are His people. In the sacred name of Jesus Christ, amen.

In this quote we see the protagonist, "His people," or rather, "the Lord's Church." While no other church is explicitly mentioned, the exclusionary element of Nation narratives is in the discourse—members of the Lord's Church are God's people, members of other

churches are not. The spiritual nation of the Stability mode is here narrated as God's people, and as is often the case in Nation narratives, the virtues of hard work and love of the people are employed.

The highest concentration of the Nation root narrative was found in the April 2020 speech "Opening the Heavens for Help" wherein Nelson revealed the Church's new logo. As shown in figure 1, 7.8% of this speech was Nation, including the last sentence, "I know that He will respond to the pleadings of His people. I so testify in the sacred name of Jesus Christ, amen." Again, the exclusionary element of the Nation narrative is present—will God only answer the prayers of "His" people? Even the logo is an expression of the Nation narrative. Coding an image is not the same as coding discourse. When coding discourse, the protagonist, antagonist, and their respective functions are discovered within the text itself. Coding an image is perhaps more implicit than explicit. However, Nelson's use of Nation codes in his explanation of the new logo lends some inductive weight to this explanation. To illustrate, in figure 4 I will compare the Church's new logo to the most common contemporary Christian symbol—the cross.

Nelson describes the Church's new logo by noting the symbolism of Jesus standing under the arch, which is to remind one of Christ leaving his tomb a resurrected being. When placed next to the cross we see that the Church stands in contrast with the rest of Christianity—outsiders celebrate his death, but *his people* celebrate that he, again, lives. The largest text of the new logo illustrates the most important words—"The Church *of* Jesus Christ"—as opposed to someone else's church. This may also relate to common phraseology in the Church found in the first section of the Doctrine and Covenants:

And also those to whom these commandments were given, might have power to

lay the foundation of this church, and to bring it forth out of obscurity and out of

darkness, *the only true and living church upon the face of the whole earth*, with

which I, the Lord, am well pleased.[105]
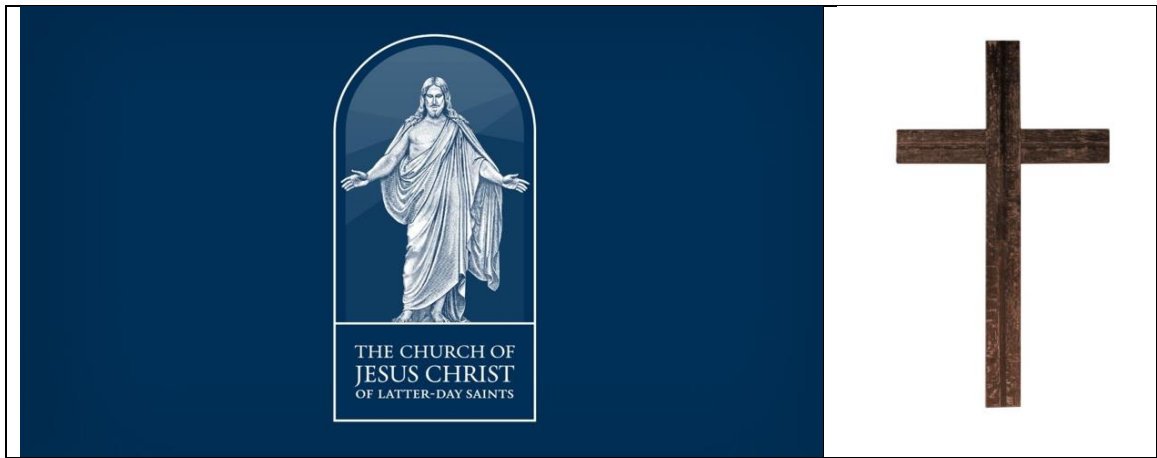
Figure 4. The Church's Logo and the Christian Cross

The Church is a living church, others are dead churches. The change in logo may have

something to do with Nelson's shift away from the word "Mormon." Perhaps Nelson

does not wish the Church to be othered in Christendom, but to claim space within it as

God's true people. While Nelson rarely employs the exclusionary logic of the Nation root

narrative, and while his use is rather tame, one could imagine much darker iterations. The

potentiality of a Latter-day Saint populism emboldened by the Nation root narrative is

embodied in the Church's very canon.

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[105] Doctrine and Covenants 1:30, emphasis added.

Behold there are save two churches only; the one is the church of the Lamb of

God, and the other is the church of the devil; wherefore, whoso belongeth not to

the church of the Lamb of God belongeth to that great church, which is the mother

of abominations; and she is the whore of all the earth.[106]

The Latter-day Saint #DezNat movement (Deseret Nation) employs the Nation mode

often, and with an explicit exclusionary purpose. For those interested in positive relations

between different factions of the Church as well as between the Church and other groups,

it is perhaps a good thing Nelson seldomly and mildly utilizes the Nation mode.

Inclusion and Recognition: President Nelson's Feminist Thought

The Inclusion and Recognition root narratives are expressions of the dignitarian

imagination, and are often found in discourses of feminist, anti-imperialist, anti-racist

concerns as well as critiques of religious dogma and heteronormativity.[107] Rather than a

critique of the means of defense or the means of production, the dignitarian imagination

is a critique of the abuse of social power by those who control the means of socialization.

As found in Chart 4, dignity values only comprised 1.52% of Nelson's discourse—and as

seen in Chart 2 this included 0.99% Recognition and 0.53% Inclusion. As mentioned

earlier, when Nelson occasionally left the securitarian mode, it almost seemed as if he

was adding detail or flavor to the greater securitarian story. Equality and Dignity codes

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[106] 1 Nephi 14:10
[107] Simmons, 180

added complexity and detail to Nelson's securitarian discourse, but never became dominant themselves. Even in the "Spiritual Treasures" speech—the major speech with the most Dignity codes—these comprised a significant but minority 6.52% of the text compared to Security's 32.15% (see Figure 1).

In "Spiritual Treasures," Nelson acknowledges the feminist movements within the Church and considers their concerns. But then Nelson carries these concerns back into a Stability mode where he responds to them in greater depth. This is what I consider President Nelson's feminism. It is a securitarian feminism that argues separate but equal roles, pivots from equality to salvific co-equality, and defends the security interests of women. This is not feminism as it is broadly understood. Feminists seek not only to protect women from the physical abuses of men, but to change their inferior status inherent in a patriarchal model, include them in their fair share of distribution in the marketplace, and liberate them from the psychological effects of sexist formation.[108]

It could be said that, within a conception of heaven and salvation, Nelson shares some common goals with contemporary feminism. Nelson considers women and men to be equal in status. However, Nelson defends traditional gender roles; his is a separate-but-equal brand of equality. In contrast to feminism broadly speaking, Nelson does not consider gender inequalities in the here and now, and instead focusses exclusively on salvific equality, or the distribution of heavenly blessings. For example, while only men are ordained to the priesthood, Nelson says the following:

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[108] See Wollstonecraft, *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*; Warren, "The Power and Promise of Ecological Feminism."

How I yearn for you to understand that the restoration of the priesthood is just as

relevant to you as a woman as it is to any man (Spiritual treasures, October 2018).

The heavens are just as open to women who are endowed with God's power

flowing from their priesthood covenants as they are to men who bear the

priesthood (Spiritual treasures, October 2018).

Here we see concern for the equal distribution to the outgroup inherent in the Inclusion narrative, but instead of economic distribution it is the distribution of heavenly blessings. This is perhaps a rebuttal to Ordain Women, a Latter-day Saint feminist movement arguing for the priesthood ordination of women. It seems that while Nelson considers priesthood duties a divinely appointed gender role, women are still entitled to an equal share of the blessings that flow from it. Instead of referring to "covenants," here Nelson refers to them as "priesthood covenants" allowing him to connect women to the priesthood without ordination.

Nelson's concern for the equal distribution of heavenly blessings relates to his primary concern—the spiritual/physical protection of the spiritual nation. If women acquired an unequal distribution of heavenly blessings, they would have fewer protections from spiritual/physical dangers. In the quote below, Nelson connects distribution to protection:

Every woman and every man who makes covenants with God and keeps those

covenants, and who participates worthily in priesthood ordinances, has direct

access to the power of God. Those who are endowed in the house of the Lord

receive a gift of God's priesthood power by virtue of their covenant, along with a

gift of knowledge to know how to draw upon that power... Sisters, you have the

right to draw liberally upon the Savior's power to help your family and others you

love (Spiritual treasures, October 2018).

For Nelson, whoever enters the spiritual contract and holds up their end is entitled to

spiritual blessings, regardless of gender. Differing gender roles considered demeaning in

feminist arguments are eclipsed in Nelson's discourse by a distributive notion of salvific

co-equality. He does not consider the interests of women *as* women; in the Stability mode

he considers the interests of women as Church members. He does not see a hierarchy of

value with men on top and women on the bottom—gender roles are morally irrelevant in

his view. Instead there are separate but equal gender roles, and what is morally relevant is

the equal distribution of heavenly blessings.

Values: Security, Dignity, Equality and the Absence of Liberty

As can be seen in Figure 5, Security was the dominant value, comprising 32.99%

of the discourse. Equality (1.84%) and Dignity (1.52%) were minimally present, and

there was a complete absence of Liberty values within the dataset. That does not mean

Nelson is unaware of political coercion, and it does not mean he does not value liberty

per se. Many of the political movements the Church supports are framed as religious

liberty issues. And, as already mentioned, human agency is important to LDS thought.

What Nelson seems to value more than anything else is the spiritual/physical safety of his

people; and this safety is achieved by focusing on the covenantal contract between God

and humankind. In other words, political structures and social arrangements seem to have

nation. To understand the absence of liberty values in Nelson's discourse, it may be
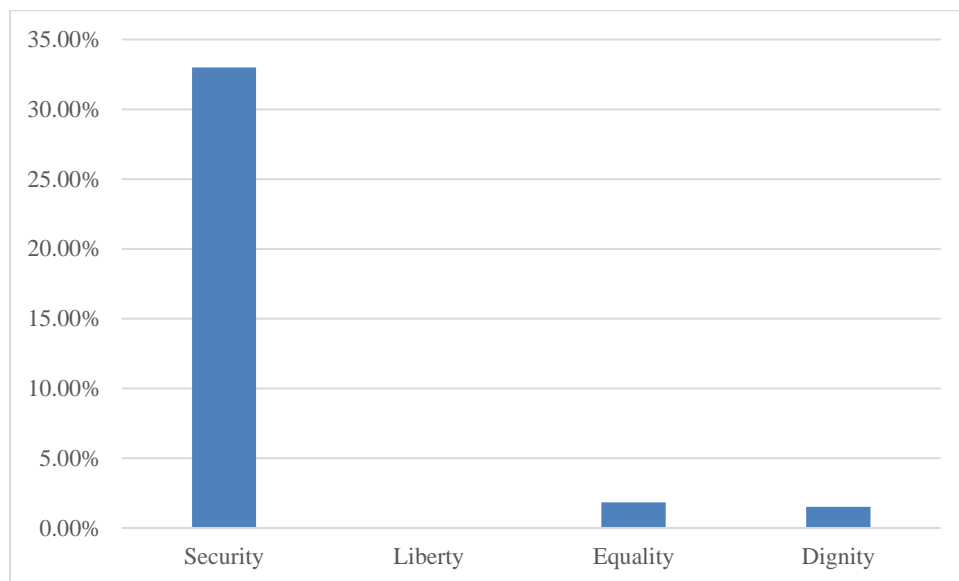
Figure 5. President Nelson Values

necessary to make a distinction between agency and *salvific agency*. The Church Nelson

presides over is well aware of political coercion, and even uses its financial resources to

combat it. But there is no political coercion that can keep a Saint out of heaven. Salvific

agency is omnipresent because, in terms of obedience to the covenants, human beings are

things that act, not things that are acted upon.

The absence of liberty values could also have something to do with the Church's positionality within the securitarian imagination. As Simmons asserts, the libertarian imagination is a direct response to the securitarian's promotion of state power, "Hobbes's State becomes an antagonist for [John] Locke's liberty."[109] In the West's history, the libertarian imagination is a critique of securitarianism. It is logical in a securitarian mode to exclude libertarian discourse. After all, in Nelson's Stability logic, what is freedom from the Church but the lack of spiritual/physical safety? This reasoning is present in Elder M. Russel Ballard's 2016 speech "To Whom Shall We Go?"

> If you choose to become inactive or to leave the restored Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, where will you go? What will you do? The decision to "walk no more" with Church members and the Lord's chosen leaders will have a long-term impact that cannot always be seen right now.[110]

In terms of salvific agency, freedom from the Church is merely the lack of spiritual/physical safety. Political coercion is irrelevant to salvific concerns.

Conclusion

The Stability narrative dominant in President Russel M. Nelson's dataset is a story of ignorant masses being overcome by virtuous citizens (i.e., Saints). Through this

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[109] Simmons, *Root Narrative Theory and Conflict Resolution*, 35.
[110] Ballard, "To Whom Shall We Go?"

mode, Nelson sees moral disorder as a threat to the stability of Church and the spiritual/physical safety of the individual. Protection from moral disorder comes through the creation of a covenant between humankind and God who promises a variety of spiritual and temporal blessings in exchange for obedience to the moral norms that bring order to the world and salvation in the world to come. Stability sits within the securitarian imagination often represented by thinkers such as Thomas Hobbes in the West, and Confucius in the East. This moral logic has presented itself in arguments for economic regulation such as Garrett Hardin's tragedy of the commons dilemma, as well as arguments for humanitarian aid found in the discourse of humanitarian NGOs. President Nelson breathes this logic into a spiritual realm that understands humankind—their actions, history, and salvation—as well as God's relationship to humankind through a securitarian narrative structure. These thinkers share common moral grammars, but also have similar aims. Each seeks to bring order to a disordered world and meet the basic needs of humankind. Nelson, on behalf of God, steps into a world of chaos and disorder and, through his priesthood authority, brings order through mere words. The message is clear and forceful: do this, don't do that, and you will have peace and security.

The findings of this study have implications for the way Latter-day Saints see the world and for root narrative theory itself. It seems that Simmons is correct in his claim that each root narrative can explain entire worlds while simultaneously ignoring the implications of other root narratives. This chapter's findings imply there is a propensity in the Stability mode to focus on the biased folkways themselves, to imply actors while focusing explicitly on their acts. Finally, the findings of this dataset suggest Simmons is

correct in his claim that root narratives can be found in any political language—including religious discourse.

The way we see the world has implications, be they positive or negative. Seeing the state of the world as a product of individual behavior restricts morality to the level of personal action. If moral considerations are limited to individual behavior, structuralism—including structural violence, and cultural violence—may seem counterintuitive. However, seeing the world and your own wellbeing as the product of your behavior fosters what psychologists describe as an internal locus of control. This is one of the primary aims of cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) since an internal locus of control correlates to increased wellbeing, lower rates of trauma, and a greater ability to tolerate stressors.[111] Latter-day Saints are well known to be a happy and positive people, with close-knit families and longer lifespans than others in American society.[112] It is within the realm of possibility that their moral grammar fosters an internal locus of control and increases their wellbeing. Stated differently, even if Nelson's belief in a spiritual-social contract is false, his discourse may still provide value because it fosters an internal locus of control.

As the Prophet, Seer, and Revelator, President Nelson is not just a representation of Latter-day Saint thought, he is the embodiment of it. Attending Conference is a duty for the Saints who are invited to pray beforehand and ask God to teach them personally.

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[111] See Dobson and Dobson, *Evidence-Based Practice of Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy*; Stanley, *Widen the Window*; Lukianoff and Haidt, *The Coddling of the American Mind*.
[112] Enstrom and Breslow, "Lifestyle and Reduced Mortality among Active California Mormons, 1980–2004."

That the voice of God on earth is securitarian has implications. By speaking almost singularly through a mode that is only concerned with abuses of security power (i.e., the power to create spiritual/physical depravation), Nelson is ignoring liberty, equality and dignity. As will be seen in the next chapter, security power is not the focus of Ex-Mormon discourse. Rather, they are primarily concerned with the outgroups marginalized by the hierarchies of value created through Nelson's securitarian discourse.

CHAPTER 3. DIGNITARIAN LIBERATION AND THE MORAL SYSTEMS OF EX-MORMONS: THE CHURCH AND THE MARGINALIZED OTHER

Upon exit, Ex-Mormons leave a hierarchical organization with a centralized leader, a totalizing value-system that explains the world and their place within it, bodied spiritual rituals, and a tight-knit community. But through various social media platforms secular Ex-Mormons do not necessarily have to leave community experiences altogether. Upon leaving the Church many join a community of Ex-Mormons who interact largely within disembodied and anonymous online gatherings.[113] The r/exmormon Reddit page (r/exmormon) is host to the largest of these gatherings with 197,000 members at the time of writing. R/exmormon offers Deconverts and transitioning persons a place to interact anonymously with others who can relate to their experiences and doubts without affecting their ingroup status with believing members of the Church (i.e., their friends and family). Given deconverting members mask their intent to leave from believers,[114] r/exmormon functions as a cathartic respite where doubts and frustrations are shared; through this process new beliefs and values are explored and a new community is created.

In this chapter I present an analysis of the most popular 27 posts from the r/exmormon page. Unlike Nelson's speeches analyzed in the last chapter, this data has no institutional legitimacy because there are no official institutions. Instead, this data is representative because it was selected by a democratic consensus within the largest community of Ex-Mormons. In this chapter I present a mixed-method root narrative

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[113] Avance, "Seeing the Light."

[114] Hinderaker and O'Connor, "The Long Road Out."

analysis of these posts that includes a) r/exmormon's root narrative profile, and b) ideological nexus. After discussing the narrative world of Ex-Mormons, I c) discuss how the Church and Ex-Mormons position each other in discourse and how this relates to the conflict between them and d) consider deconversion as narrative transformation. Perhaps the most important finding presented in this chapter is that the moral grammar of the Ex-Mormon community differs considerably from the moral grammar of the Church—the two groups are experiencing radical disagreement.[115] Both groups privilege different abuses of power, different types of harm, and express conflicting protagonists and antagonists. One group's victim/hero is the other's villain, and what one group sees as an abuse of power, the other sees as their primary method of overcoming an abuse of power.

Like General Conference, r/exmormon is the premier ritualistic gathering place of the community. However, these two communities differ considerably as do the nature of their ritualistic gatherings. GC is strictly hierarchical and monological—allowing only the highest-ranking leaders time to speak—occurs twice a year, is audible and textual, and is not anonymous. r/exmormon is egalitarian and dialogical—allowing anyone to post and anyone to respond—is constantly occurring, textual, and anonymous. And while there is no centralized leader of Ex-Mormons, Reddit's filters allow users to organize posts by popularity. On Reddit there are two kinds of votes: up-votes and down-votes. And while Reddit's point algorithm is a guarded secret, top posts are a ratio of up-votes and down-votes that filter popular posts to the top of the page while limiting controversial posts. Because Reddit's algorithm gives critics some degree of veto power in a post's

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[115] See Ramsbotham, "Radical Disagreement and Systemic Conflict Transformation."

popularity, the most popular posts are not necessarily those with the most up votes—

r/exmormon is not a winner-take all democratic system of popularity but a kind of

consensus democracy, though the exact degree of requisite consensus is unknown. At the

time of data collection, the top post had nearly 25,000 up-votes. Due to the high number

of posts between 8-9,000 the dataset only includes the posts with 9,000 or more up-

votes—27 total posts.

While this chapter analyzes the most popular posts from the largest community of

Ex-Mormons, that does not mean it represents the root narrative profiles of all Ex-

Mormons. As Cragun has noted, there may be differences between the minority of vocal

Ex-Mormons and those who leave the Church quietly. And as the studies of Riess as well

as Scharp and Beck have found, Ex-Mormons differ widely in their conceptions of self,

post-deconversion religiosity, and world views.[116] Reddit users tend to be more educated,

more politically liberal, poorer, with slightly Whiter than the general U.S. population.[117]

When designing this research, I began following the r/exmormon page. In my anecdotal

experience, the culture of the community seems to tilt toward non-religious and liberal

Ex-Mormon thought. According to Reiss's study, agnostics, atheists, and those who

believe nothing in particular only make up 45% of Ex-Mormons.[118] While I cannot verify

the religious or political affiliation of any Redditor, let alone all of r/exmormon, I argue it

is likely secular and politically liberal Ex-Mormons are over-represented in the dataset.

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[116] Riess, *The Next Mormons*; Scharp and Beck, "'Losing My Religion.'"
[117] Shatz, "Fast, Free, and Targeted."
[118] Riess, *The Next Mormons*, 221.

The Recognition/Liberation Synthesis and the Genealogy of Ex-Mormon Morals

As shown in figure 6, the most prominent codes in the dataset were Recognition (22.72% of total discourse) and Liberation (22.47%). Both of these root narratives are expressions of the dignitarian imagination which casts the undaunted outgroup as the victim/hero of abuse by the ingroup. The primary logic of the dignitarian imagination is the Recognition root narrative that identifies the means of socialization as the power being abused. And while this abuse can be expressed through economic distribution and government policy, bigotry itself is its fundamental element. This moral logic is common to feminist, racial equality, anti-colonialist, and LGBTQ+ equality movements. In some posts, Ex-Mormons themselves played the role of undaunted outgroup lending credence to Brewster's argument that non-religious persons are a minority in the U.S who suffer similar forms of oppression to other minority groups.[119] And while many Ex-Mormons do not belong to any minority group, they often expressed solidarity with (perhaps intersecting) groups such as ethnic and racial minorities, women, and the LGBTQ+ communities. The latter was the most common protagonist in the dataset.

The Recognition and Liberation codes were often found together in the same posts, but not always in the same manner. Sometimes the two logics referred to distinct antagonists and forms of abuse as suggested in the structure of the root narratives:

Recognition: Majorities use biased folkways to create cultural disrespect of the Other

Liberation: Governments use force of law to create cultural disrespect of the Other

Other times the Recognition and Liberation logics were synthesized and indistinguishable. This may have something to do with the culture's conception of 'nation' as more a grouping of individuals than a single cohesive unit. In Chapter two I noted President Nelson's Stability narratives were often a synthesis of the libertarian

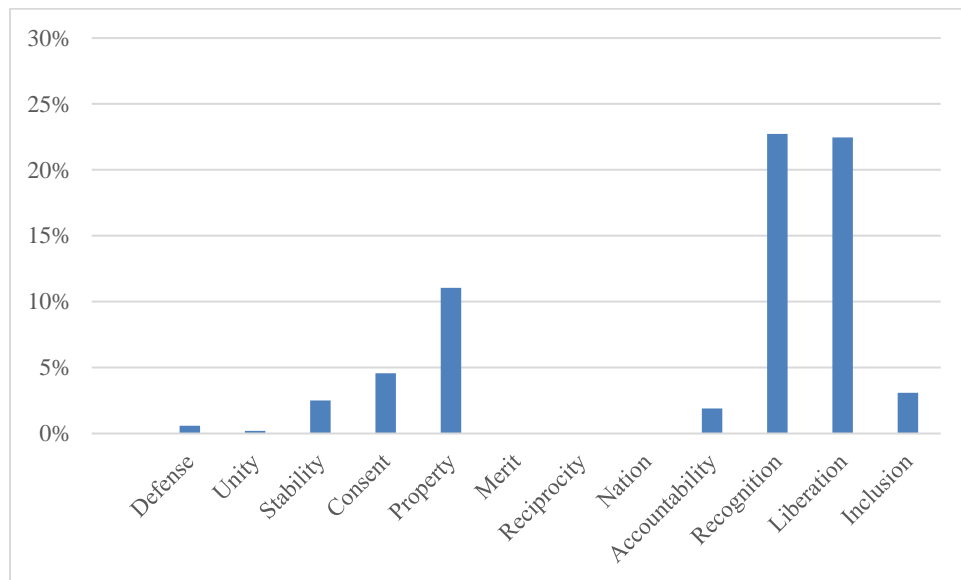Figure 6. R/ExMormon Root Narrative Profile

Property and securitarian Stability narratives because Nelson conceives of the Church as a collection of individuals. The Ex-Mormon synthesis of Recognition and Liberation is the mirror image of this but contained within the dignitarian imagination. In the Church's narratives, the synthesis occurs exclusively in the protagonist character element (i.e., 'we'

the Church are a collection of individuals). When Ex-Mormons narrate the Church as the antagonist, they carry the individualist conception of 'Church' with them. This conception synthesizes the structures of Recognition and Liberation by synthesizing their antagonist and plot element (i.e., 'they' the Church/Members are using biased folkways / force of law). Furthermore, because Recognition and Stability are within the dignitarian imagination (Nelson's synthesis occurred between two imaginations) they share the same fundamental harm (i.e., cultural disrespect). So, while Nelson's root narrative profile shows primarily 'Stability,' r/exmormon data show primarily Recognition and Liberation. As former members of the Church, it would make sense that Ex-Mormons carried this conception of 'nation' with them upon their exit.[120] But because the nation has become the antagonist and seen through a common imagination, it is more easily codable as two root narratives instead of one.

In r/DrDoubleThink's 2019 post, Recognition and Liberation were synthesized but more easily distinguishable than many other posts.[121] This post included a screenshot of Utah Senator Jim Dabakis' response to one of Elder Dallin H. Oaks' heteronormative General Conference speeches.

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[120] The indistinguishability of Nation and Individual is perhaps a very American (libertarian/liberal) phenomenon. Given Americans and some other Western societies see the individual as the fundamental unit of society, this finding in both Church and Ex-Mormon datasets demonstrate how liberal notions of individualism alter the very structure of American narratives.

[121] There may be a relation between the distinguishability of different root narratives and a posts word count. When a post is limited of a few sentences, it is difficult to distinguish between two root narratives as is demonstrated below.

In response to a [speech] given today…..Dear LGBTQ youth of Utah, especially

Mormon and trans kids. I know you feel alone and unloved. No matter who says

it, even if it is your family or some high titled official—you are NOT 'satan's'

plan. You matter. You are loved. You don't need to change who God made you to

make 'them' feel like all their cogs fit into their tidy religious machine. This

Senator and so many other Utahns are standing with you and not with the

bullies—of all ages! People who mouth loving you but that demand that you to

conform to their narrow, 1950's, UnChristian requirements are dangerously ill-

informed at best and evil at worst. It will get better for you. I see you. I love you.

Dabakis' distinction between 'family' and 'them' as well as 'some high titled official'

and 'tidy religious machine' distinguishes two antagonists (i.e., the Church and its

members). 'Their' need to feel their religion as an ordered system functions as a biased

folkway while 'UnChristian requirements' functions as a force of law. And yet, even

when the two logics can be distinguished, they overlap as much as they do not.

'UnChristian requirements' could just as easily be coded as a biased folkway if we

imagine Dabakis connecting this plot element to the Members rather than the Church. In

the narrative world of Ex-Mormons these two moral logics are either complimentary or

coterminous. For example, r/corgiboat's 2018 post synthesizes the two logics:

Protesting gay marriage for the Mormon church at 13 vs being gay at 23.
Life gets better.

Figure 7. R/corgiboat's 2018 post

Protesting gay marriage is a biased folkway (a Recognition plot element), but it is done for the Church (a Liberation character element); the post is both Liberation and Recognition simultaneously. Of course, because the conception of the Church is individualistic, 'Church' could refer to either 'the majority' or 'the government.' By assuming the former, r/cogiboat's post would only be a Recognition narrative, and by assuming the latter it would be a synthesis of Recognition and Liberation. One of the issues in qualitative coding is the necessity to assume the author's intent. Because several other posts suggested a Recognition/Liberation synthesis, I chose to interpret 'the Church' as an institution while knowing the conception of institution is individualistic. One could make an argument for either choice.

In his book "The Sociological Imagination," C. Wright Mills notes differences between a personal trouble and a public issue.[122] Personal troubles become public issues through an imaginative process (i.e., through one of the twelve root narratives). The synthesis of Recognition and Liberation ties the two root narratives together, creating a powerful moral grammar that makes sense of the unique troubles of minorities and outgroups within the Church as serious moral issues. The Ex-Mormon Recognition logic feeds into the Liberation narrative by casting the LDS moral code as a bigoted religious dogma (e.g., heteronormative). Without this, the Liberation narrative would not make moral sense because 'I'm being forced to be good' is not a personal trouble that can be easily transformed into a social issue. Furthermore, Ex-Mormons are not simply critics of a Church they wish to reform. They have deconverted and exited the community. If the Church is merely a collection of individuals with an inaccurate view of God's plan, then it makes sense to stay and make change one member at a time. But if the Church is a hierarchical and inaccessible institution—especially one based on a lie—then both Members and outgroups must be liberated from it. The capacity to see the Church as an institution that actively marginalizes outgroups is the grammar of institutional exit.

A personal trouble's capacity to become a social issue depends on historical events and cultural values, or rather, on a community's ability to imagine a particular trouble as a social issue. In American political discourse, Recognition and Liberation narratives exist, but are often distinct. Malcolm X's emphasis on Liberation is distinct from Ta-Nehisi Coates' emphasis on Recognition—and the two thinkers also prescribe

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[122] Mills, *The Sociological Imagination*.

different solutions to racism and race conflict.[123] The Ex-Mormon's synthesis is a

perhaps unique innovation, but makes sense given recent historical events and shifts in

American cultural values. Since the women's suffrage movement beginning in the mid

19th century, American society has had the capacity to see sexist bigotry as an abuse of

cultural, government, and economic power. This moral logic has been used to critique

other forms of bigotry and abuses of power such as the civil rights movement that fought

racist bigotry and segregation, as well as the movement for marriage equality that fought

homophobia and heteronormativity. The capacity to see norms as abusive holds the

capacity to transform what a dominant group could interpret as a 'personal problem' for

minorities and outgroups into a social issue.

The Church was not neutral during the movement for marriage equality but spoke

out against it, funded movements against its legalization (e.g., Proposition 8 in

California), and even issued new Church doctrine (i.e., the Family: A Proclamation to the

world) in response. As noted in the previous chapter, after the Supreme Court's 2015

Obergefell v. Hodges ruling, the Church issued a new policy that labeled practicing

homosexuals as apostates and prohibited the baptism of their children. Despite monetary

investment, numerous speeches, new doctrine and new policy, only 40% of millennial

Latter-day Saints strongly agreed with the 2015 policy,[124] and the Church is retaining

considerably fewer millennials than past generations. The Church retained 75% of the

Silent generation, 72% of Boomers, and 62.5% of Generation X. But in the millennial

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[123] See Simmons, *Root Narrative Theory and Conflict Resolution*, 181–202.
[124] Riess, *The Next Mormons*, 144.
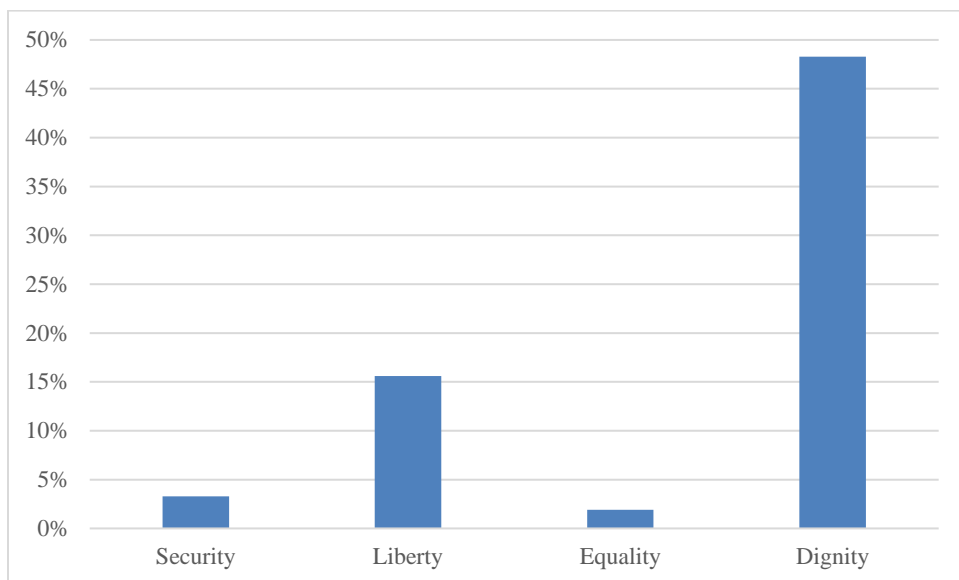
Figure 8. R/ExMormon Values

generation, retention rates have plummeted to 46%.[125] The power of the

Recognition/Liberation narrative to understand the contest between Church and outgroup

and find moral meaning in favor of the outgroup helps us understand why. The

movement for marriage equality produced powerful dignitarian stories that cast

heteronormativity and the institutions that enforce it as abusive to LGBTQ+ groups who

were denied basic rights and subject to discrimination. The power of this moral grammar

is demonstrated by the U.S Supreme Court's ruling that all states must grant and

recognize same-sex marriages. In 2019 the Church rolled back its 2015 policy and has

increased its cooperation with LGBTQ+ organizations.

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[125] Riess, 6.

The power of the Recognition/Liberation logic can be seen in the posts of

r/DrDoubleThink and r/corgiboat. R/corgiboat presents a direct challenge to the Church's

Stability narrative that asserts obedience to the LDS moral code will bring both happiness

in this life and salvation in the next. On the left we see a picture of an uncomfortable

looking pre-teen juxtaposed with a happier, comfortable young adult photo on the right.

The caption and the photos illustrate the message—life gets better for the undaunted

outgroup when you leave the institution (and ingroup) who marginalizes you. The

Recognition/Liberation narrative can also see a God with dignitarian concerns as seen in

r/DrDoubleThink's post, "You don't need to change who God made you to make 'them'

feel like all their cogs fit into their tidy religious machine." In Nelson's discourse, the

moral norms of the Church create a stable moral order that bring its members

physical/spiritual wellbeing. In Ex-Mormon discourse, some of these same norms are the

weapon used to abuse outgroups through marginalization. This marginalization is not

simply exclusion, but a form of social and psychological abuse that influences people to

despise parts of themselves they did not choose and cannot change (i.e., their queerness,

race, or gender). Seven posts utilized Recognition and Liberation together, most often in

equal amounts. The welding of the two logics is as follows: *The Church and its Members*

use bigoted beliefs and policy to create coercive disrespect for Undaunted Outgroups.

This synthesis makes for the majority of Ex-Mormon narratives, and is perhaps the

primary moral logic of the community.

Given the rollback of the Church's 2015 policy, the lack of consensus among

members, and the historically unprecedented exodus out of the Church, it seems the

Church is losing a battle over meaning. The Church's Stability narrative that casts homosexuality as a biased folkway which threatens the nation's spiritual/physical wellbeing is losing to a Recognition/Liberation narrative that casts the Church as an institution of bigots who cloak their hatred in religious dogma and manufacture policies designed to harm the undaunted outgroup. And while the Church has taken steps toward LGBTQ+ acceptance, its narrative approach has been morally incoherent. On the one hand the Church teaches its members to act with love and kindness to LGBTQ+ persons. But on the other it considers homosexual behavior as a serious violation of God's covenant—so serious that it ranks just below murder.[126] Even within the Church's Stability narrative, it is a stretch to treat near murderous behavior with kindness. This incoherence is being supplanted by other moral grammars with greater capacity to find moral meaning in unfolding events. Senator Dabakis' quote serves as a good example, "people who mouth loving you but…demand that you…conform to their narrow, 1950's, UnChristian requirements are dangerously ill-informed at best and evil at worst." For Ex-Mormons, the Recognition narrative opens the door to seeing LDS norms as misguided and harmful, makes room for doubting the truth-claims of the Church, and allows them to find moral meaning in unfolding events (i.e., to make sense of personal troubles as public issues, even if those personal struggles are not their own.)

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[126] Alma 39:1-6

Dignitarian Inclusion: A Critique of Religious Privilege

The dignitarian Inclusion narrative is a critique of economic abuse but differs from the egalitarian imagination in its protagonist and protagonist function. The victim/hero of the Inclusion narrative is the undaunted outgroup: *Elites use bargaining power to create cultural disrespect of the Other*. This moral grammar can often be found in feminist critiques of patriarchal economic abuse (i.e., women making less than men for the same work) and racial equity critiques of racist economic systems. In the r/exmormon dataset there was only one post that showed a dominance of Inclusion codes— r/calledtoslave's 2018 post:

Equal rights for gay marriage

Figure 9. R/calledtoslave's 2018 post

In this post we see an interplay of both Liberation and Inclusion narratives working together to tell a clear story of a marginalized outgroup and a privileged ingroup. In the first sentence the LGB community is cast as the undaunted outgroup who seeks equal consideration under the law (i.e., Liberation). In the second sentence the religious institutions are cast as the antagonist who are allowed special privileges within the same legal system (i.e., Inclusion). The discrimination suffered by the LGB community is juxtaposed with the privilege of religious communities to illustrate a clear moral story of an abuse of the means of socialization.

Libertarian Antinarratives: Mormon-God and the Rational Individual

The libertarian imagination casts the rational individual as its protagonist and identifies various forms of political coercion as the fundamental harm committed against them. As seen in figure 6, libertarian Consent and Property root narratives made up 13.02% of the dataset. The primary moral grammar of the libertarian imagination is the Consent narrative: *Governments use force of law to create political coercion of the Individual*. These narratives can often be found in the liberal philosophy tradition foundational to American society, International NGOs such as Human Rights Watch, anarchist movements, and the Austrian School of Economics (i.e., free-market tradition). In the r/exmormon dataset, Property was three-times more common than Consent, and the latter was exclusively found in the consideration of children such as r/Kolob_hikes' 2020 post:

Religious freedom, what about freedom from[?]

I feel sick to my stomach when I see the church posting about attacks on religious

freedom when I had to enlist the help of a LAWYER and a notary to undo a

religious contract of religious affiliation I made when I was EIGHT YEARS OLD

The enactment of a contract (force of law) between the Church (Government) and a child (Individual) is a violation of liberal notions of consent and functions here as a form of political coercion. Unlike the Recognition/Liberation narratives, this Consent narrative is not an alternative story. Instead, it only exists in opposition to the Church's 'religious freedom' narrative. This is what Cobb calls an *antinarrative*, or a narrative that only exists in opposition to another narrative—usually one that negatively positions the speaker. Cobb argues that despite a speaker's good reasoning, antinarratives cannot alter the interaction in a conflict setting because they do not change the power dynamic between the first speaker and the 'anti' speaker.[127] R/Kolob_hikes' post serves as a good example. It does defy liberal values to enact a binding contract with a child who cannot consent. But the Church's religious freedom story positions secular persons and LGBTQ+ communities as a threat to the rational individual's freedom to practice their religion. As an Ex-Mormon, r/Kolob_hikes has a 'damaged identity' they cannot

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[127] Cobb, *Speaking of Violence*, 161.

escape.[128] Antinarratives may be based on good reasons, but in a hierarchical institution, Church leaders will always have more legitimacy than critical exiting members, even if those exiting members express well-reasoned points in a common moral grammar.

The Property root narrative shares a common antagonist with the Stability and Recognition narratives (i.e., the Majority) but differs in its protagonist and protagonist function: *The Majority uses biased folkways to create political coercion for the Individual*. As seen in figure 6, Property root narratives made up 11.04% of total Ex-Mormon discourse. A historical example of this root narrative can be found in James Madison's 'tyranny of the majority' argument in "The Federalist Papers." In Madison's story the antagonist is the rabble who would use direct democracy to redistribute (i.e., steal) the wealth of the opulent. Madison utilizes the Property mode to argue for a complex separation of powers in the U.S constitution that will prevent the majority from using democracy to steal the wealthy minority's property. In the posts of Ex-Mormons, Property codes were most often found when Church members attempted to coerce Ex-Mormons into obedience to the Church's moral norms. For example, in r/floydweathered's 2020 post they shared a screenshot of a conversation between themselves and their mother in which the latter was attempting to force them to attend church the next day.

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[128] While Nelson does not utilize the Consent mode, Church leaders like Dallin H. Oaks do so often while discussing contemporary political issues. This is especially true when Oaks considers issues of religious freedom.

I'm working tomorrow. I'm going to keep working Sundays. I've read the book of

Mormon and prayed daily for eighteen years of my life. You don't pay my rent,

you don't pay my tuition, you don't pay for my insurance, and I'm an adult. So

you have no say in my decisions anymore okay? Maybe if you want to stop acting

like this I might schedule a Sunday off in the future just to humor you. Have a

good night Mom.

R/floydweathered captions the screenshot with a description of the mother's response, "I

have never in my life stood up to my mother until today. After this exchange she banged

on my apartment door for an hour, called my manager and tried to get him to fire me, and

then disowned me for the third time." Through reading the book of Mormon and praying

daily, the protagonist has positioned themselves as a rational agent who can now make

their own decisions. When the norms of reading and praying failed to produce the

intended result (i.e., obedience to the law of the sabbath), the member turned to coercing

the individual into obedience through a variety of biased folkways from the power-

differential of the parent-child relationship to threatening their income.

In r/u_zelph_esteem's 2017 post there is a nod to the Church's Stability narrative,

but a strong pivot to Property. This post included a quote from American celebrity Penn

Jillette:

I do rape all I want. And the amount I want is zero.

The question I get asked by religious people all the time is, without God, what's

to stop me from raping all I want? And my answer is: I do rape all I want. And the

amount I want is zero. I do murder all I want, and the amount I want is zero. The

fact that these people think that if they didn't have this person watching over them

that they would go on killing, raping rampages is the most self-damning thing I

can imagine.

This post is the libertarian response to the Church's Stability narrative which argues

freedom from violent death and chaos comes from obedience to God's commandments.
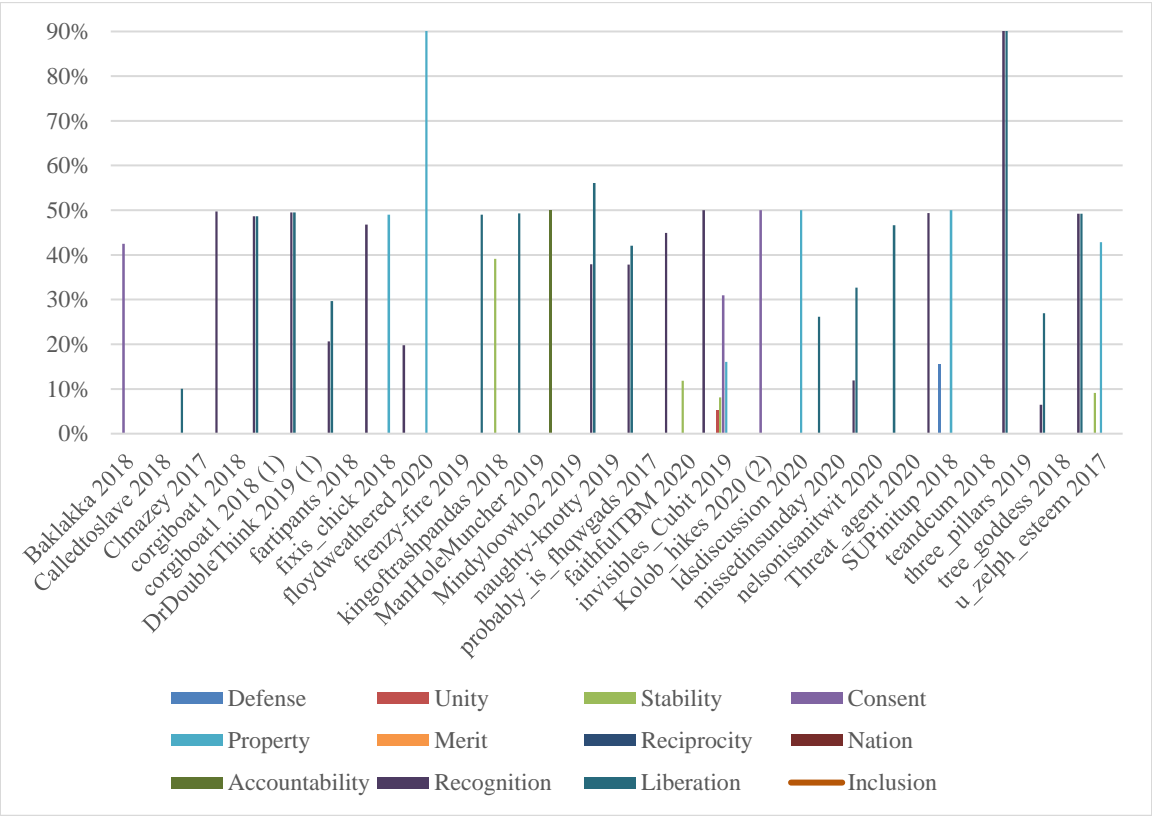
Figure 10. R/ExMormon Root Narrative Profile by Post

Through this application of the Property mode, it is argued God is unnecessary for a stable society. The capacity to be a moral agent is inherent to the individual person. God's perceived influence is not a stabilizing force for society, but a coercive and self-damning concept. In several posts, Ex-Mormons used the term 'Mormon-God' to identify the Mormon idea of God as a biased folkway or coercive law, or rather, as a being who demands obedience for no good reason. While 'Mormon-God' was not always used within a libertarian mode, there was often a juxtaposition between the irrational Mormon-God and the rational individual as seen in r/Invisibles_Cubit's 2019 post:

> I was Mormon for 66 years of my life. During that time, I never met God. I never saw God except in paint and statue. But, He is a concept in my mind. My kids are real, living flesh and blood. Abraham is a starkest example of Mormon God. I'm sorry, but I'm not sorry. If God were to tell me to kill my child I would firmly let Him know that I was not willing to commit an immoral act. And, that He as God should embrace the common morals that mankind already understands: Killing children is heinous. If my morality (not being willing to kill my child) sends me to hell…fine. I'm still going to love my children above the "invisible God," as Paul referred to him.

President Nelson's Stability narrative fosters obedience to the moral order of the Church while the Ex-Mormon's Consent narrative does the opposite. In this post r/Invisibles_Cubit recasts 'God'—the heavenly being in the Church's narratives—as

'Mormon-God,' a coercive manmade concept that usurps the inherent value of individuals. Through the moral logic of the Consent mode, the value of persons (i.e., "my children") and the rational morality of humankind are of greater value than God and his laws.[129] In fact, obedience to the laws of an immoral God is immoral (i.e., 'heinous' and 'immoral act'). Such a radical change in interpretation is not without historical roots. R/Invisibles_Cubit's narrative is patently similar to Martin Luther King Jr.'s "Letter from a Birmingham Jail," a canonical text in American society. Both r/Invisibles_Cubit and King are responding to Stability narratives that argue peace is achieved through obedience to divine law, and both pivot to a Consent narrative that recasts a particular law as a manmade, coercive code that should disobeyed and dismantled. King argues, "one has a moral responsibility to disobey unjust laws" because, "an unjust law is no law at all."[130] R/ Invisibles_Cubit expresses a similar logic by recasting God as no god at all (i.e., 'Mormon God', 'a concept' and 'the invisible God'). In both texts, coercion is overcome through an act of disobedience despite the unjust consequence, "If my morality…sends me to hell…fine. I'm still going to love my children above the 'invisible God.'" The enemy of the libertarian is Hobbes' Leviathan. That Ex-Mormons respond to the Church's Stability narrative with a Consent narrative makes sense given their historical context and relationship with the Church.

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[129] It should be noted that while r/Invisibles_Cubit's post is in the Consent mode (i.e., lumped code) there are Stability codes (i.e., spliced codes) as well.
[130] King, *Letter from the Birmingham Jail*.

Splicer Coding Stability, Accountability, and Defense

In the r/exmormon dataset, securitarian codes like Stability and Defense were usually present when authors were responding to the Church's securitarian narratives. So, while Stability makes up 5.2% of the total discourse, this rarely included full root narratives. In qualitative coding there are *lumping* and *splitting* strategies, the former is a broad brushstroke approach where a whole section is given one code. Splitting breaks a segment into smaller codable moments and offers a more nuanced and detailed view.[131] While coding, I utilized both methods. I would first go through a text coding whole segments and then go through each segment more carefully to identify elements of other root narratives. This allowed me to see the primary values and dominant root narratives in the text, but also allowed me 'discover' what the author may be responding to. Most of the Stability and Defense codes were 'splitter' codes where elements of the securitarian story were mentioned, but that existed within a 'lumper' code. For example, in r/u_zelph_esteem's 2017 post quoted in the last section, I argued they were giving a libertarian response to the Church's Stability narrative. I coded the whole post as Property, but I also coded smaller segments as Stability (underlined below):

> The question I get asked by religious people all the time is, <u>without God, what's to stop me from raping all I want?</u> And my answer is: I do rape all I want. And the amount I want is zero. I do murder all I want, and the amount I want is zero. The fact that these people think that <u>if they didn't have this person watching over them</u>

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[131] Saldaña, *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers*, 24.

that they would go on killing, raping rampages is the most self-damning thing I can imagine.

Finding the elements of other root narratives allows me some idea of what the author is responding to by recasting characters and their functions in a new moral grammar. That these small codes made up 2.5% of the r/exmormon dataset implies Ex-Mormons are familiar with the Church's securitarian moral grammar but disagree with its application. Other partial codes such as Accountability (1.9%), Unity (0.2%) and Defense (0.6%) were far less prominent in the dataset.

Discussion of Findings: Marginalization and Conflict Dynamics

This thesis finds the conflict between the Church and Ex-Mormons in the tension between the impetus to meet the salvific/physical needs of the Latter-day Saints on the one hand, and the socio-structural marginalization of outgroups on the other. As demonstrated by Ex-Mormon's dominant focus on dignitarian root narratives, Ex-Mormons are a marginalized outgroup who express significant grievances with the Church and its members, and who express solidarity with other outgroups. Marginalization is not only a psychologically harmful experience, but it also has significant effects on conflict dynamics. So much so, that narrative and conflict thinker Sara Cobb refers to some aspects of marginalization as *narrative violence*: "Narrative violence…is the materialization of a narrative of oppression in which one party is separated from narrative and relegated to the language of agency to account for its pain

and suffering."[132] Ex-Mormons and the outgroups they find solidarity with experience

marginalization within the Church through the othering effect of its dominant narratives.

As the Prophet-leader, President Nelson's primary goal is to meet the spiritual/physical

needs of members by fostering obedience to Church norms. Nelson does this through the

Stability mode in which obedience to Church norms is cast as the only way to happiness

in this life and salvation in the next. These Stability narratives create strong salvific

incentives to obey and not question the Church's moral norms because obedience is cast

as a moral imperative.[133]

Intended or not, one of the effects of the Church's Stability story is to separate

outgroups from narrative (i.e., from storying their experience) by relegating them to the

language of agency (i.e., they chose disobedience) to explain their pain and suffering

(i.e., their marginalization, unbelief, anger, or frustration). While Church leaders tell the

members to welcome sincere questions,[134] the force of their own stories motivates non-

believers to hide their doubts from other members and explore their questions in settings

outside of the Church. These effects can be observed in the empirical literature, such as

Hinderaker and O'Connor's finding that doubting members experience doubt in secret

and mask their intent to leave from believing members, and Avance's finding that Ex-

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[132] Cobb, *Speaking of Violence*, 33.

[133] This may be why Mark Paul Leone has argued the Church does not organize its community through common belief like many other American Christian churches, but through common behavior. While this is contested in the literature (see White and White, "A Critique of Leone's and Dolgin's Application of Bellah's Evolutionary Model to Mormonism"), the Church does seem to lean more on common behaviors to unite its membership than common creeds (see Leone, "The Economic Basis for the Evolution of the Mormon Religion.")

[134] Uchtdorf, "Come, Join with Us."

Mormons talk in anonymous online gatherings.[135] They can also be found in the

numerous studies of women and LGBTQ+ persons in the Church.[136]
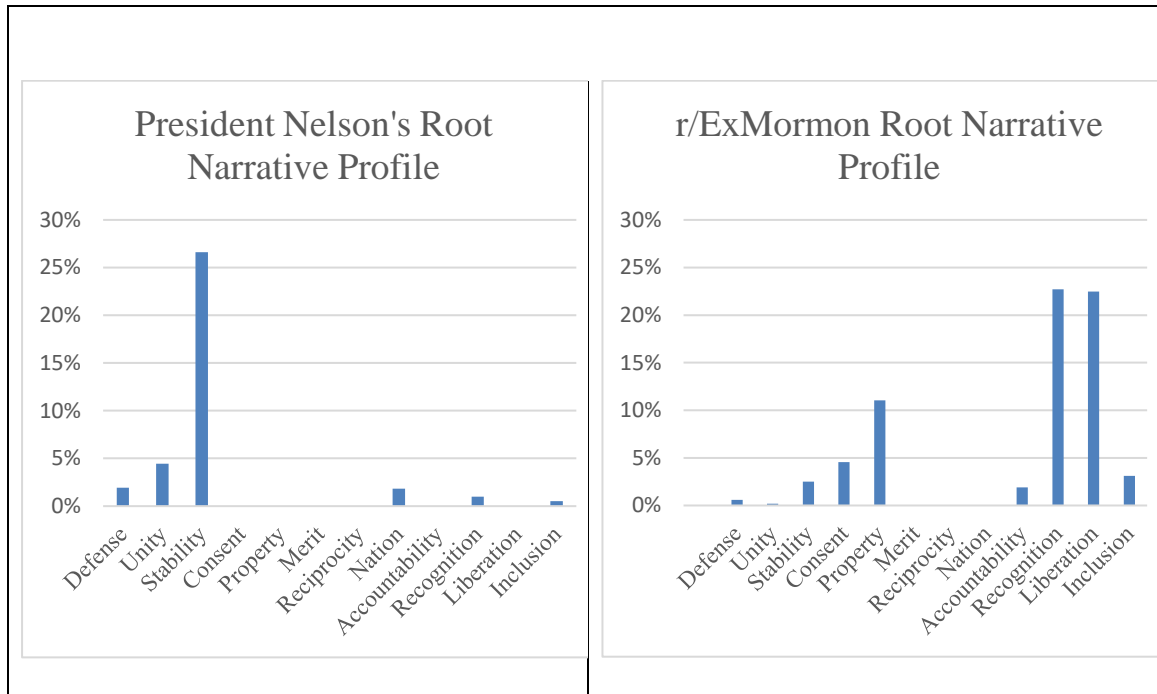
Figure 11. Comparing the Church and Ex-Mormon Root Narratives

Because the Church understands God, salvation, and morality primarily through

the securitarian imagination, it has difficulty seeing the marginalization of its queer,

black, and female members as a moral issue of salvific importance. What is most

important for salvation and the stability of society is obedience to a covenant (i.e.,

specific commandments and the blessings that flow from them). Within this logic,

[135] Hinderaker and O'Connor, "The Long Road Out"; Avance, "Seeing the Light."
[136] For example see Ross and Finnigan, "Mormon Feminist Perspectives on the Mormon Digital Awakening"; Joseph and Cranney, "Self-Esteem among Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Same-Sex-Attracted Mormons and Ex-Mormons"; Hinderaker, "Whom I Have Called."

marginalization remains a personal trouble to be resolved through personal obedience to the covenant. Ex-Mormons see something the Church does not—there is no amount of obedience to any commandment that will relieve the marginalized person from their inferior status within the Church. Perfect obedience does not allow women to hold the priesthood, does not prevent racial and ethnic minorities from experiencing racial bigotry, and does not allow queer persons to have a sustainable marriage and family experience (i.e., a same-sex marriage). Marginalization ends when the Church and its ingroup members change, or rather, when these three outgroups are fully welcomed in policy and practice. Until that occurs, Ex-Mormons and other dignitarians will likely continue to see the Church and its influence as something to be liberated from, not something to be ignored or applauded.

R/exmormon is a setting that, like all settings, mobilizes language and stories toward preferred outcomes and relationships. One of these aims is to hear and legitimize victims of marginalization and assist them in seeing doubt, disagreement, and disobedience differently. It is a setting that turns victims into heroes by allowing Ex-Mormons and others an opportunity to unload their burdens through anger, humor, and sometimes mockery. As an accessible, anonymous, and dialogical gathering place, r/exmormon is a setting uniquely geared to meet the needs of doubting members and Ex-Mormons. On the r/exmormon page, doubt is legitimate, criticism is welcome, and the diversity of moral grammars found therein allow non-believers to explore what they agree and disagree with in discourse. They can even explore the stories that cast

disobedience to the Church's moral norms as a moral imperative, such as the libertarian narratives explored above.[137]

It is both away from the Church and within new settings like r/exmormon that doubting members and Ex-Mormons have found disparate ways of storying their experience. And within this setting we can see narrative transformation. The victim/hero in the Church's narratives has been re-storied as a villain; the values of security have been backgrounded while the values of dignity and liberty have been foregrounded; and disbelievers have found solidarity with the very outgroups marginalized by the Church's stories, doctrines, and policies. In short, the two groups are experiencing what Oliver Ramsbotham calls *radical disagreement*.[138]

That the Church and Ex-Mormons narrate conflicting protagonists and antagonists, different abuses of power, and different types of harm have significant implications for understanding their conflict dynamics. Not only is one's victim/hero the other's villain, what one sees as an abusive power the other sees as their primary method of overcoming abusive power. The Church sees itself as a spiritual government bringing moral order to a disordered world. For them the moral norms of the Church are the laws of God—the only way to find true happiness in this life and *eternal life* in the next.[139] Ex-Mormons are a part of the Majority who risk their eternal life and create unhappiness for

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[137] As Raven Haymond observed in their article "Tasting the Forbidden Fruit as Rite of Passage," disobedience to some aspects of the Church's moral code is sometimes as an Ex-Mormon rite of passage

[138] See Ramsbotham, "Radical Disagreement and Systemic Conflict Transformation."

[139] In Mormon theology, 'Eternal life' is not a temporal concept but a qualitative one. Eternal is the name of God, thus 'eternal' life is the quality of life God experiences. All humans experience eternal life in the temporal sense because all humans are eternal beings (see *The Doctrine and Covenants.*). So 'eternal life' to Latter-day Saints means living forever with God opposed to living together outside of God's presence.

themselves and others by engaging in wrong behavior. [140] For the Church, overcoming the sins of the world is to create traditional nuclear families, be good citizens, obey the commandments, and teach others to do the same. But some of these norms and behaviors are the very biased folkways prominent in the Ex-Mormon narratives. It is heteronormativity, patriarchy, and a rigid moral code that marginalizes LGBTQ+ persons, women, and Ex-Mormons. These norms create the 'damaged identities' these minorities and outgroups must live with and fundamentally cannot escape while living within the Church. Women and LGBTQ+ persons are second-class citizens regardless of their behavior. Ex-Mormons are outsiders in the Church, their communities, and their families regardless of their character. Ex-Mormons see themselves as an undaunted outgroup fighting a dominant ingroup for the basic dignity others take for granted. Overcoming the disrespect of the Church and its Members is to leave the institution and fight its heteronormative, patriarchal, racist, and oppressive influences; and as seen in the libertarian narratives, that may include disobeying Church rules.

Given the conflict between the Church and Ex-Mormons, it should not be surprising when either attribute the worst of intentions and character traits to each other. In r/exmormon Church leaders are often accused of being deceitful empire-builders who knowingly lie to the members for tithing money. Meanwhile, members often use terms like "apostate," and "anti-Mormon" to negatively position and dismiss anyone who

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[140] In light of the Church's Stability narrative, Ex-Mormons have the potential to be seen as morally worse than non-Mormon persons because they have been exposed to the light and rejected it.

criticizes the Church.[141] If a member can only see an Ex-Mormon in their own moral grammar, they cannot see them in the Ex-Mormon's moral grammar; this is true of Ex-Mormons as well, despite their once been believing members themselves. *Misunderstanding* the narrative world of the other prevents one from hearing their discourse as moral concern and influences a person to interpret the other as insincere and even illegitimate.

Table 3. Oppositional Narrative Positions

Root Narrative First Formulation				
Conflict Party	**Antagonist**	**Abusive Power**	**Injustice**	**Protagonist**
The Church	The Majority	engages in wrong behavior	creating physical/spiritual deprivation	for the Children of God
Ex-Mormons	The Church / The Members	use institutional power and individual bigotry	creating coercive disrespect	for the Undaunted Outgroups
Overcoming Abusive Power Formulation				
Conflict Party	**Protagonist**	**Means of Overcoming**	**Injustice**	**Antagonist**
The Church	The Children of God	engage in right behavior	to overcome physical/spiritual deprivation	of the Majority's wrong behaviors
Ex-Mormons	The Undaunted Outgroup	deconstructs a hierarchy of value	to overcome the marginalizing abuse	of the Church and its Members

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[141] Cragun, "Letter to the Editor: 'Apostates,' 'Anti-Mormons,' and Other Problems in Seth Payne's 'Ex-Mormon Narratives and Pastoral Apologetics.'"

However, *understanding* the way each group sees themselves, the other, and the conflict between them can increase their capacity to hear the other and see them as legitimate persons with sincere moral concerns. Within a conflict setting, moving from misunderstanding to understanding is the difference between narrative violence and conflict resolution. In a diverse society, understanding a diversity of moral grammars as sincere difference is fundamental to positive peace. In the conflict between members and Ex-Mormons, understanding the disparate moralities, values, and experiences of each group is important for conflict resolution and is perhaps the most important finding of this thesis because it is through 'understanding' that these groups can see how they each contribute to the conflict between them, and thereby find ways to build a better future together.

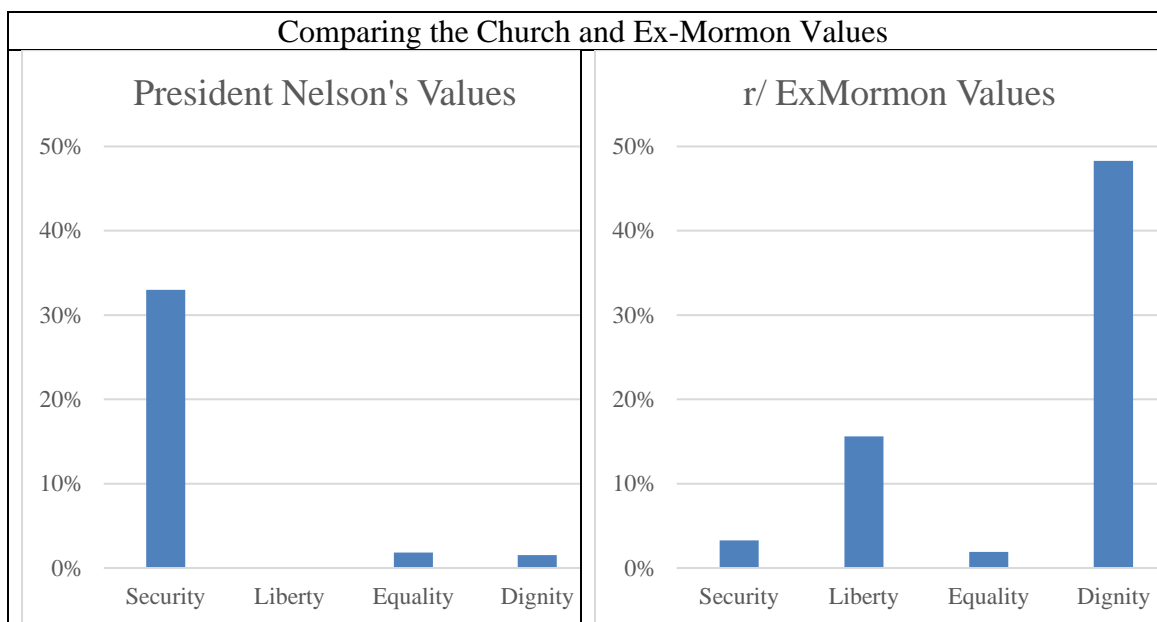Comparing the Church and Ex-Mormon Values

Figure 12. Comparing the Church and Ex-Mormon Values

And yet, where should a conflict intervention be targeted? Does it make sense to engage in conflict resolution between disbelievers and the voluntary faith institution they have left? Especially when they are marginalized in the organization's discourse and treated as threats to the spiritual/physical wellbeing of believers? Within a non-voluntary institution like a State, conflict resolution and structural change must occur because ingroups and outgroups are in a state of interdependence. If either group is not allowed to satisfy their basic needs, they will rebel and cause trouble for the other.[142] Even the coercive instruments of state violence and criminal justice have a limited ability to mitigate such conflicts. But within a voluntary faith institution, the disbeliever has the ability to leave. The Church and disbelievers are not interdependent the way ingroups and outgroups are within States. On the other hand, disbelievers are often born into families and communities bound by the moral norms of the Church; and as Hinderaker has argued, the religious experience of Latter-day Saints is totalizing—it comprises the bulk of one's identity, worldview, family relationships and friendships. As long as believers and disbelievers exist in family and friendship with each other, they are interdependent. Their interdependence is a fact, but not one that must be experienced destructively. It is fully within the realm of possibility for believing members to believe in the truth claims of the Church without marginalizing those othered by the Church's narratives. It is also fully within the realm of possibility for Ex-Mormons to deconvert without losing

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[142] Burton, *Deviance, Terrorism & War*.

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constructive relations with friends and family. In Chapter five I will discuss deconversion as conflict and present some strategies for resolution.

Conclusion: Deconversion as Narrative Transformation

From the beginning of religious psychology there has been an interest in studying conversion, but it was not until the recent growth in religious unafilliation that religious psychology became interested in deconversion.[143] Deconversion has been studied through a variety of psychological constructs (e.g., personality, attachment, wellbeing, etc.) but is here studied through comparing the moral grammar of a church and its former members. While deconversion is a psychological process of losing faith and leaving religion, we can see by comparing the root narratives of the Church and Ex-Mormons that deconversion is also a process of narrative transformation. As demonstrated herein, Ex-Mormons have found disparate ways of storying their experience outside the Church. The victim/hero of their mother institution's narratives have been re-storied as villains; the values of security have been backgrounded while the values of dignity and liberty have been foregrounded; and disbelievers have found solidarity with the very outgroups marginalized by the Church's stories, doctrines, and policies.

While further research is needed to understand deconversion as narrative transformation, I hypothesize the following. At the onset of doubt, the believer becomes a non-believer (i.e., someone who no longer knows what they believe). If their faith

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[143] Streib, "Leaving Religion."

community does not have a constructive mechanism to deal with doubt, the non-believer will hide their doubts and mask their intentions to leave from believers. In this liminal space, the non-believer vacillates between belief and disbelief, social activity and inactivity in the Church as they attempt to find a way to reconstruct their identity and re-story their experiences. If they find moral meaning in their religious experience despite a lack of faith, they will have the capacity to reconstruct a religious identity within the Church. If they cannot find moral meaning in their religious experience, they will find it elsewhere and will eventually become a disbeliever.

CHAPTER 4. THE MORAL SYSTEMS OF THE PEOPLE: ROOT NARRATIVE DIFFERENCES AND SIMILIRATIES OF BELIEVERS, NON-BELIEVERS, AND DISBELIEVERS

While the last two chapters analyzed the discourse from the premier gathering places of each community, this chapter considers each group outside those gathering places. Through a non-probability convenience sample method, I recruited 25 participants and conducted five focus groups interviews: two of Latter-day Saints, two of Ex-Mormons, and one of Undecided persons. Outside their ritualistic gathering places, participants were not subject to the constraints of those settings but were instead subject to the constraints of a common focus-group interview setting. Each group was asked similar questions and their responses were coded using the same root narrative coding scheme used in the previous chapters. By triangulating the narratives of the people with the narratives found in their premier gather places (i.e., *ritualistic discourse*), this thesis finds a) a dominant securitarian moral system in both the Church and its believing member participants, b) a dominant dignitarian moral system in r/exmormon, Ex-Mormon, and Undecided participants, c) a high prevalence of dignitarian narratives among participants of all focus groups, and d) a more in-depth understanding of these disparate moral systems.

Most participants were from the millennial generation, but each group differed in terms of its marital status, gender representation, and sexual orientation. Latter-day Saint Focus Group #1 (LDS1) consisted of five millennial women and one generation X male, while Latter-day Saint Focus Group #2 (LDS2) consisted of four millennial men and one

millennial woman. Ex-Mormon Focus Group #1 (EX1) included five women, two of whom identified as gay, while Ex-Mormon Focus Group #2 (EX2) consisted of one male and one female, both of whom identified as gay. The Undecided Focus Group #1 (UD1) consisted of two male-female couples, both of whom were new parents and from the millennial generation. All participants were either Hispanic or White, and from the United States.

Beginning in this chapter, I will often refer to believing Latter-day Saints as *believers*, Undecided Persons as *non-believers*, and Ex-Mormons as *disbelievers*. Belief is often a dichotomous concept in religious communities—one either believes or they do not. But in the Latter-day Saint community, deconversion is a long process wherein the person vacillates between belief and disbelief. The experiences of some Undecided participants necessitate a third category—*non-belief*—a state in which the person has suspended judgement on faith-based questions. The believer and disbeliever can both say, "I believe," or "I know," but the non-believer cannot. While some Undecided participants do have beliefs—some orthodox and others unorthodox—they have suspended judgement on many faith-based questions until they can work through the truth claims of the Church. It should be noted that participants do not refer to themselves as non-believers, but as "inactive Mormons," or "transitioning," and also noted they 'identify' differently depending on who they are talking to. For those in this liminal space, there is not a clear social script. The words deist, agnostic, and atheist correlate closely to the terms believer, non-believer, and disbeliever, but are less precise. Some of the non-

believers and disbelievers in this study are still deists but are either unsure or disbelieve in some of the Church's truth claims.

Because belief is a fundamental element of deconversion-conflict, participants are titled according to the qualities of their beliefs. All participants have beliefs—a disbeliever is not someone who does not believe in anything. Instead, these terms place the person in relation to their mother organization—they are either in a state of belief and activity (believer), a state of inactivity coupled with either unorthodox belief or liminality (non-believer), or a state of disbelief (disbeliever).

The Believers: The Stabilizing Leaders and the Unifying Members

Similar to the discourse of President Nelson, LDS1 and LDS2 show a primary concern for the spiritual/physical deprivation of the Children of God. And when they spoke through dignitarian and libertarian modes, they too focused their moral consideration on the choices and actions of people (i.e., the majority) rather than policies or distribution. From Nelson's position of leadership, he speaks primarily through the Stability mode, incentivizing members to engage in right behavior to overcome the sins of the world. While remaining within the securitarian imagination, the members of both LDS focus groups speak more often from the Unity mode from which they cite the blessings of Church and community and note their duty to God as a higher purpose that quells factionalism and dissent. While Nelson sees himself creating moral order in a world of chaos, Church members see themselves fostering community through devotion.

But, as can be seen in figures 14 and 16, Church members are not a monolith, they speak through a diversity of moral grammars.

Unlike President Nelson, LDS1 and LDS2 show a serious concern for the marginalization of outgroups and sincere concern for the coercion of individuals. In the ritualistic gathering places of Latter-day Saints and Ex-Mormons, the former spoke primarily securitarian narratives and the latter dignitarian ones. Church members seem relatively split between both imaginations and cite concern for both the salvation of God's children on the one hand and the marginalizing effects of Church "culture" on the other. There was no uniform discourse in the LDS focus groups—participants tended to stick with two or three root narratives. In LDS1, members who spoke primarily through a securitarian mode and others who spoke primarily through a dignitarian mode would disagree or argue with one another. However, there seemed to be less tension amongst those who spoke through libertarian or egalitarian modes. As the dominant narratives in each communities' gathering places suggest, conflict seems to occur squarely between the securitarian and dignitarian imaginations. What the LDS focus group data contributes is in finding that these disagreements are not only between the Church and Ex-Mormons, but within Church membership.
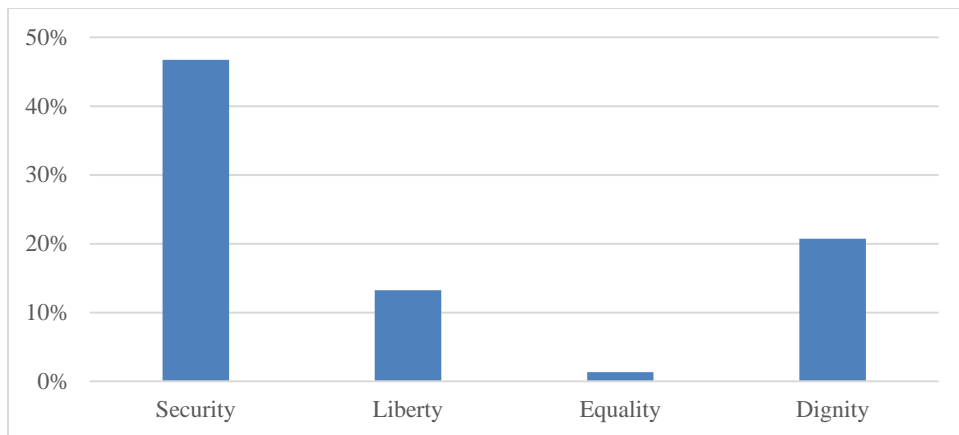
Latter-day Saint Focus Group #1

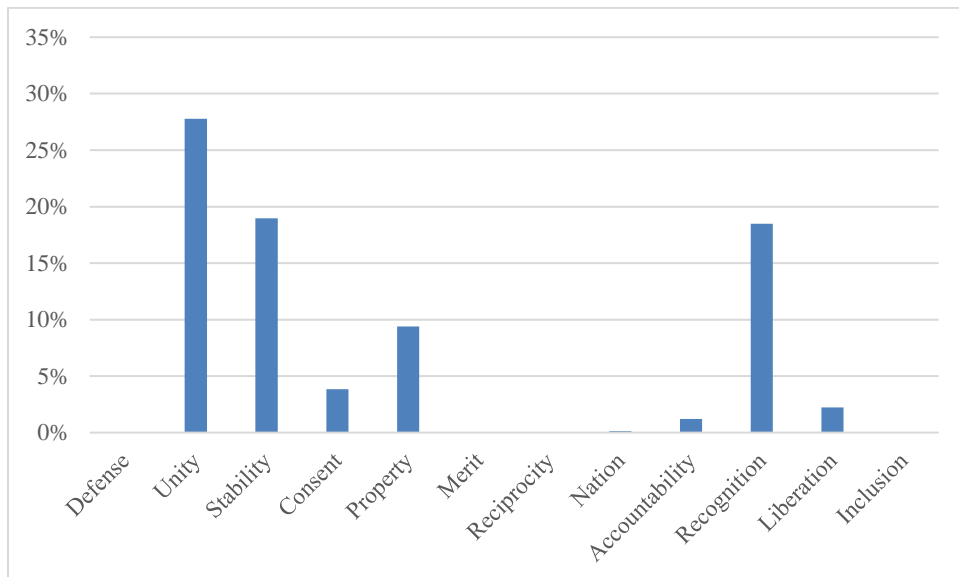Figure 13. Latter-day Saint #1 Values

Figure 14. Latter-day Saint #1 Root Narrative Profile

Latter-day Saint Focus Group #1 (LDS1) consisted of five millennial women and

one generation X male; much of the disagreement between participants took place

between the male participant who spoke primarily through the Unity and Stability modes

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and two female participants who spoke primarily through the Unity and Recognition modes.

[Being a member of the Church] is extremely important in my life, where I'm surrounded by people who, in my family at least, believe the same way I do and it's become, like she said, you help lift each other up. And it's all because of that core faith that you have in God and as to why we're here on the earth. So, I think all of us… that's why we believe we're here and everything. I also believe that faith is extremely important just in our society as well, so faith in something like faith in God or a belief in something beyond you can help actually keep a more moral society and a more peaceful society as well. (LDS1, P3)

My mom grew up in a very less active home and her brother was excommunicated when she was little, so it caused a lot of, kind of, black sheep type of looking at their family. And changed my view a little bit about what it's like to be a church member, because not only did I see what P2 and P3 were talking about where it was a great community…but I also saw the hurt that came from it as well…it helps me to really understand what it's like to be an outsider without being on the outside, I hope that makes sense. Anyway, but also, I'm grateful that I grew up in that type of environment, because my mom growing up seeing the negative effects of being a member really tried to teach us to be the best that we could be to everyone around us. And that's what I try to hold on to

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and look to when I'm looking at members of the Church… I hope for [those] kind

Christlike attributes. (LDS1, P1)

The disagreement between these participants was not a difference between orthodox and

heterodox, but rather which aspects of the religion were foregrounded. For P3, common

belief in something greater than oneself fosters unity, a more peaceful and moral society,

and eclipses the factionalism of identity groups. But for P1, the Christlike virtues of

uplifting the outcast and defending the downtrodden were primary and fundamental. The

hinge that brought one to the securitarian view on the one hand and either the dignitarian

or libertarian on the other were the covenant and the Christlike virtues. If a participant

foregrounded the covenant, they were singularly securitarian, but if they foregrounded

Christlike virtues they were often speaking through another imagination.

The difference between securitarian covenant behaviors and the dignitarian or

libertarian Christlike behaviors is a fundamental difference in values. Securitarian

participants were more prone to value harmony, express gratitude for community, and to

be sensitive to criticizing the Church. And while all believing participants understood the

Church's reasoning for the 2015 policy, securitarian participants were more likely see it

as a consistent and coherent action that should be respected. Dignitarian and libertarian

believers welcomed dissent, argued that the Church focused on things that do not matter,

and were more sensitive to the marginalizing and coercive effects of Church 'culture.' By

foregrounding Christlike virtues, they see covenant behaviors as irrelevant to the virtue of

the person. What matters is how the person treats others. Do they coerce or marginalize

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them? Then they are bad people, their obedience to the covenant and religious beliefs are morally irrelevant. Dignitarian and libertarian believers were more likely to dislike the 2015 policy and, like Ex-Mormons, see the covenant behaviors as a marginalizing force rather than a unifying higher purpose.

We focus more on the things that don't really matter when it comes down to the church. So like, we're focusing more on that you're getting tattoos and piercings versus are you being a Christlike human being. (LDS1, P1)

Sometimes being a Member to me is like, sort of a blessing and a curse… I love the doctrine and I do identify as a member, but at the same time, and especially being in Utah… that culture is sometimes, especially this last year, has been extremely frustrating for me. And at times I do really miss—we used to live in Dallas—and I miss that diversity. (LDS1, P5)

The Mormon culture that everyone hates I, I have a hard time, I understand why they are saying it because there are some judgmental people out there, but we aren't talked at at all and… we never hear about, you know "let's kind of make this person, let's judge them so that they can be put back into their right place." Nothing is ever taught like that… I really enjoy the camaraderie of being able to find a lot of other people… here in Utah that might be members that I didn't know before and then automatically you have this connection… I've had some of my

best friends growing up and now they've left the Church, I would say the majority

of my best friends have… Now all of a sudden, they have a totally different set of

morals and everything where we don't have that same connection anymore and

I'm struggling to figure out how, when we go on trips together and they want to

drink alcohol, what do I do, you know? (LDS1, P3)

While the Church cites both the covenant and the Christlike virtues as important

elements of orthopraxy, members articulate each through distinct moral systems with a

different cast of heroes, villains, abuses of power, and harms. As Simmons argues, a root

narrative is the emotional core of a rational argument.[144] By identifying which root

narrative mode members are speaking through, we have found the locus of their moral

meaning. While almost all participants found moral meaning in the Unity narrative—the

mode that justifies peace by appealing to a higher purpose—members always spoke

through at least two narrative modes. Their first was Unity (27.77%), and their second

was either Stability (18.97%), Recognition (18.5%), or Property (9.4%). Each of the

second modes cite the majority as its villain and biased folkways as their abusive power.

But each is within a different imagination, and therefore cites a distinct injustice and

victim/hero. When a believer foregrounded the covenant, the locus of their moral

meaning was Unity/Stability, and when they foregrounded Christlike virtues the locus of

their moral meaning was either Unity/Recognition or Unity/Property. Is Mormonism

about the community of the righteous, uplifting the outcast, or the liberation of the

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[144] Simmons, *Root Narrative Theory and Conflict Resolution*, 1.

individual? By speaking through a Stability, Recognition, or Property mode, believers gave a diversity of 'answers' to this question.

Mormonism is a vast tradition with a canon larger than any mainstream Christian sect. It is likely all twelve root narratives are found within Mormon canon. Believers could find the moral meaning of Mormonism through any of the twelve root narratives. There should be no surprise believers find moral meaning through a diversity of grammars. That the primary disagreements between believers is fundamentally similar to the disagreements between the Church and Ex-Mormons is worth considering. As will be discussed below, it is not only recognized outgroups who feel marginalized by the Church, but also ingroup believers who do not fit the image of the ideal member.

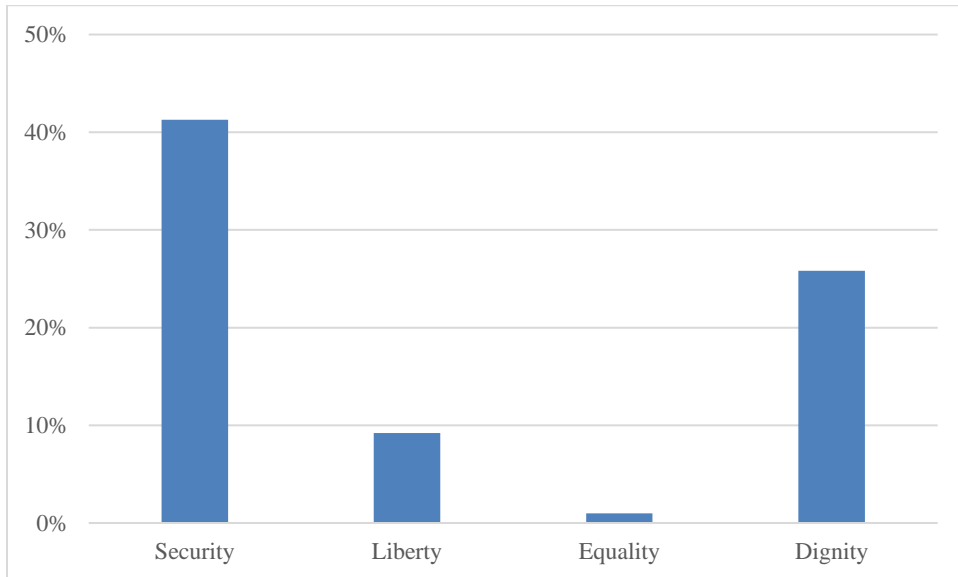*Latter-day Saint Focus Group #2*

Figure 15. Latter-day Saint #2 Values
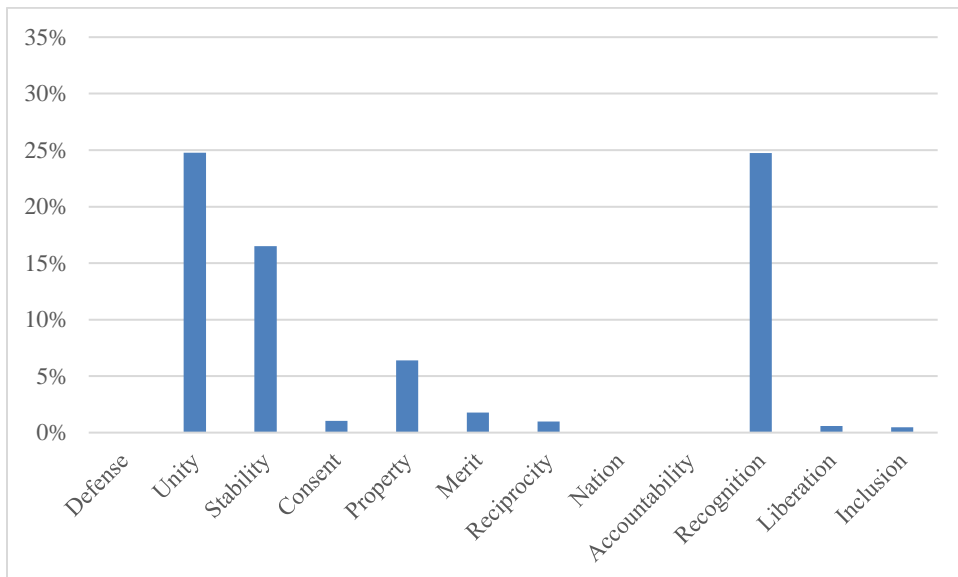
Figure 16. Latter-day Saint #2 Root Narrative Profile

LDS2 was similar to LDS1 in that members were split between the securitarian and dignitarian imaginations but was different in that each participant spoke through both moral grammars. Unity (24.77%) and Recognition (24.75%) were evenly paired, and some participants pivoted away from Stability (16.51%) and the importance of covenant behaviors.

> My faith is very important to me. I would say that most of the practices, like the things we do every day, every week, are less important to me than they might be for some… but more just the teachings and experiences I've had within the context of my faith have really become very central to why I do anything that I do, and what drives me, what motivates me. and my relationship with Christ, how that impacts my relationship with others. All the practices, in my personal view and experience, are kind of more of the context in which to practice those principles. So, it's those things—the atonement, my relationship with the savior, charity, love, service—that form the real center for me. (LDS2, P5)

In this quote we see a pivot away from Stability and the rituals of daily scripture study and weekly church attendance, and toward a relational God that values charity, love, and service to others. The Unity logic we see in this quote dips into the egalitarian imagination wherein the covenant behaviors are backgrounded—they are the 'context'—wherein the 'real' practice of religion can occur (i.e., atonement or 'at-one-ment', a harmony with God and others).

Recognition narratives were not contested in LDS2, but rather, each participant seemed to agree that the Church's norms functioned as a marginalizing force. LDS2 articulated these norms as a force that marginalized not only well-known outgroups but anyone who did not meet the image of the ideal member. But unlike Ex-Mormons, LDS2 found moral meaning in Church norms and made a distinction between the 'doctrine,' 'teachings,' or 'Church' on the one hand, and the 'culture' that applies them on the other. In both LDS focus groups, marginalization is not caused by the divinely guided Church, but its ignorant members who do not understand where the behavioral conformity required by God ends and where the cultural conformity imposed by the members begins.

> There's this uncomfortable feeling that you have to conform to be something that you're not… ideas of what it is to be a member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is often narrow and contracted. when in actual reality, the idea of what it means to be a Latter-day Saint has a breath and latitude to it that a lot of members I don't think are aware of. And so, because of this conformity and uniformity, like heterodoxy, there is a lot of pressure to conform to have orthodox opinions and perspectives… This causes people [to] feel alienated from the religion and to feel like they don't belong… And so, from there it just reaches a spiral where people… try to bring these people back, but then all that does is just cause more pushing people away because they don't feel like they're welcome, or they don't feel like they [can] change who they are. (LDS2, P2)

Within the securitarian logic of the Church, the unity members believe they are creating is narrated by other believers as an uncomfortable conformity, a marginalizing force that stems not from the teachings of God but the ignorance of members. While Ex-Mormons synthesize the Church and its members into a cohesive villain, believers ignore the Liberation mode and pin the marginalizing force exclusively on the shoulders of the members. This distinction allows them to pivot seamlessly from Unity to Recognition— two narrative modes that could otherwise be antithetical.

One of the distinct elements of LDS2 was the presence of two believing members who had left the Church and then returned. Both members were open about their reconversion story, and neither narrated through a securitarian mode.

I returned to church not because people texted me every day and not because I was force-fed scriptures. I didn't want nor need scriptures, sermons, conference talks, preachers, or to be put on like a temple prayer role. I needed someone to show me that I was accepted and loved more than our common belief in church, and I needed to feel that I was trusted, that I belonged, that I had value, and that I was intelligent and still a spiritually sensitive human being despite being 'unorthodoxical.' I needed an advocate. And so, I needed someone to listen and love me unconditionally. And that's what happened, someone listened and loved me unconditionally. (LDS2, P2)

In this reconversion story we see another pivot away from the Stability logic of the Church. The covenantal transaction where members trade obedience for spiritual blessings is unnecessary. P2 returns not for the promised blessings of the covenant but for the unconditional love of God found in the Christlike virtue of a member. He rejects the securitarian God and its promise of blessings upon exit and returns to a dignitarian God that loves the unorthodox outcast without pretext. The second reconverted participant narrated her experience through the Property narrative. Property casts the majority as the villain and biased folkways as the abusive power. But as a part of the libertarian imagination, Property sees the individual as its victim/hero and coercion as its injustice.

Community…I haven't experienced it a whole lot, but my sisters have… For me though, being a member versus not being a member—since I've been both. It really comes down to freedom and, you know, they teach it in seminary but if you sin or whatever it's not really freedom… I don't think I understood that until I came back to the church. I was pretty big into partying and drinking and I thought of it as freedom during it, but as I came back, I realized that it wasn't that at all. I felt like I had to have that in order to have certain conversations with people or deal with life in general. and so, living the gospel principles has given me more freedom than I thought I had when I started… And I kind of carry that around with [the] need to make sure the people around me know that I'm religious. And I feel like I need to act as Christlike as I can, so that I reflect the beliefs I have. (LDS2, P3)

Like President Nelson, P3 focuses on the covenant behaviors of the Church. But unlike Nelson, the purpose of the covenant is not to avoid deprivation but to avoid spiritual/physical enslavement. The covenant is not necessarily transactional but instructive. In the Stability mode, the purpose of obedience is in the promised reward—it is a transactional arrangement between a Father God and an infantilized member. The Property mode is distinct. The covenant is not a transaction, but an instruction manual for avoiding spiritual/physical enslavement. Through this instruction manual we learn not how to acquire blessings from Father God, but the natural laws upon through which spiritual treasures are acquired. When the rational individual disobeys right principles, they experience spiritual enslavement; but when they obey right principles, they are liberated like an addict free from substance. And within a state of freedom, the rational individual can be Christlike and reflect the love of God towards others.

While the dominant root narratives of believers and President Nelson are both securitarian, believers consistently spoke through the moral grammars of other root narratives. Within the securitarian Church, the leaders speak through the Stability mode where they discuss God's social contract and the importance of right behavior while the members speak through the Unity mode from which they quell dissent, cite the blessings of Church community, and appeal to higher purposes. Through the securitarian imagination, individuated covenant behaviors are foregrounded, and the Christlike virtues (i.e., how we treat others) are backgrounded. Within the dignitarian imagination, God is a being who uplifts outcasts with unconditional love and acceptance and Mormonism is the religion of this God. But in their ignorance, the members misunderstand God's purposes

and marginalize all who do not fit the false image of the ideal member. Through this logic, covenant behaviors are backgrounded, and the Christlike virtues of love and acceptance are foregrounded. Within the libertarian imagination, God is a being who teaches us how to avoid spiritual/physical slavery and how reflect his love to others. In the discourse of the believers, we even glean hints of the egalitarian God who sees the behavioral norms of the Church and the discourse of its leaders as a mere context wherein 'true religion' (i.e., at-one-ment, charity, and harmony amongst believers) and God's 'true nature' (i.e., non-transactional love) are articulated.

The Non-Believers: The Shaming Church and the Vindicating God (Undecided Focus Group #1
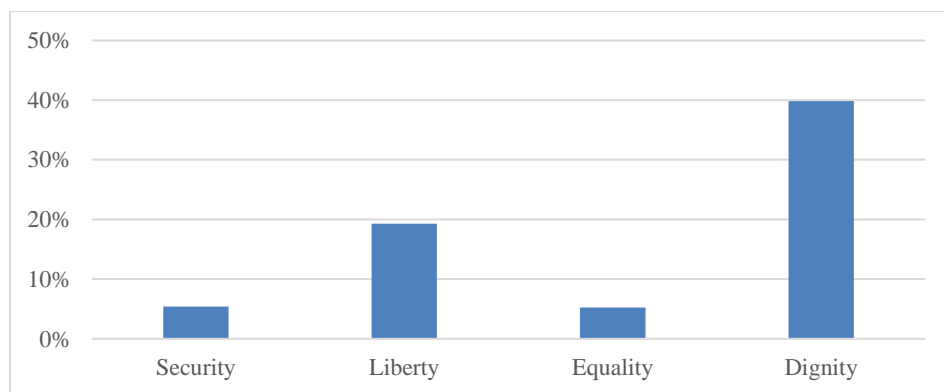
Figure 17. Undecided #1 Values
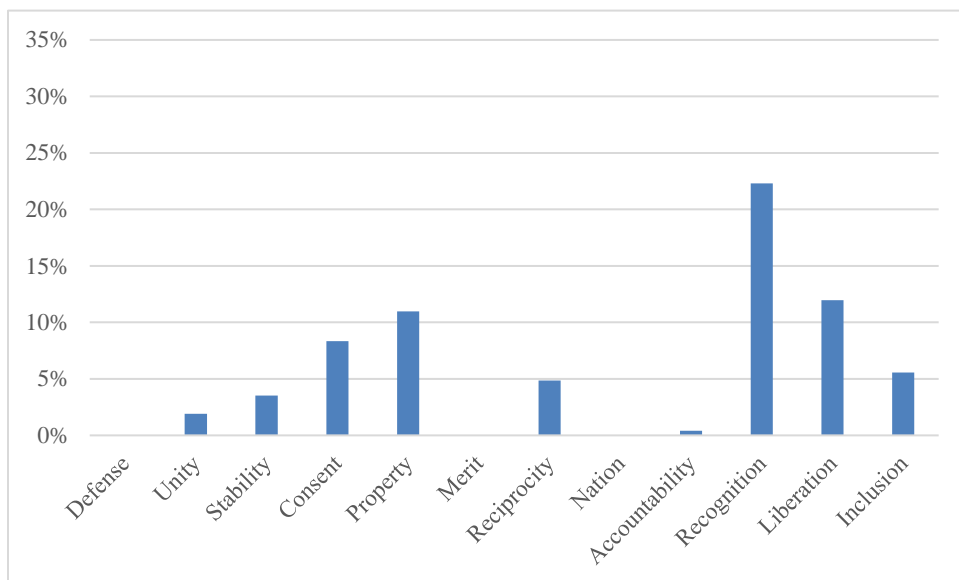
Figure 18. Undecided #1 Root Narrative Profile

The Undecided focus group was equally split along gender lines, and consisted of two millennial couples, each married with young children. Both couples had been married in a Latter-day Saint temple but had since taken a step back from the Church. While some participants believed in the Church's truth claims more than others, no participant was fully in or out of the Church. When asked what they call themselves, most articulated some form of "inactive Mormon," though one jovially said, "human." Each discussed a 'transitioning' process wherein they had stepped away from the Church to figure out where or if they belonged. For participants, the central issue was not belief in God or even the truth claims of the Church, but rather its marginalizing and coercive policies and the behaviors of the members.

Unlike believing members, non-believers rarely speak within the securitarian imagination. Their root narrative profile is similar to Ex-Mormons who see the world through the dignitarian and libertarian imaginations. But what non-believers articulated more clearly than Ex-Mormons was the way Church norms foster an internalized sense of guilt and shame—a damaged identity one cannot easily escape, despite their moral goodness.

> Here we are having to sift through all of this trauma and all of this, you know, all this trauma that comes with indoctrination as adults and I'm like, I don't want my kids to have to unpack like I am right now, because there's some heavy stuff… I have to unpack, you know? Some guilt that I felt for decades, or some things that I went to bishops for that I shouldn't have had to go to bishops for. You know, and [I] have felt like I've been such a wrong person and I don't want my children to have to feel like they have to have that as well, that they are an evil person when they're not… I don't want to be the causer, or the cause of that in the future. (UD1, P2)

What Ex-Mormons narrate as 'the Mormon hate of otherness' is seen by non-believers as an internalized shame. But whether it is the Ex-Mormon's damaged identity or the non-believer's damaged self, neither can be liberated through obedience to the covenant and both are narrated through a Liberation or Recognition mode. In this quote we see the traumatizing effects of guilt and shame even for behaviors that do not violate the covenant (i.e., "things that I… shouldn't have had to go to bishops for"). P2 sees the

Church as an indoctrinating institution that is in the habit creating unnecessary guilt and shame.

P2's desire to protect their children from the injustices of the Church was universal amongst non-believing participants. When discussing their concerns, non-believers cited two primary injustices—marginalization and coercion.

> What if my little kid here… finds out that he's gay, figures that out for himself, and he's an active member of the Church? That is a conflict he's gonna have to live with for the rest of his life. He's always going to judge himself based off the criteria that the Church has set. I would rather him not even have that conflict inside of him, you know? Because he's gonna know, raised by us, that hey if you're gay, if you're straight, if you're transgender or whatever, you're a child of God, you were made in his image, you're loved by him, you are loved by your parents, you have purpose in this world. (UD1, P1).

> [Like] P1 said about wanting him to make his own decisions. Because obviously when little kids are small, they're going to be like, "well I'm just gonna do whatever my parents are doing" so if we were going to church, he would just come with us. But I'm the same way, I don't want him to feel like he has to get baptized just because that's what everyone else does. (UD1, P2).

In the first quote we see a strong Recognition/Liberation narrative wherein the Church creates an internal and unnecessary conflict in the child that can be avoided or overcome by the correct teachings of the non-believer (i.e., you are loved and have purpose regardless of your identity). In the second quote we see a primary concern with the coercion of the child—the 'peer pressure' from other children and parents to conform to standards the child does not yet understand. Unlike the Church and its believing members, non-believing members see the Church as an institution that creates unnecessary injustices and seeks to protect their children from the othering self-hate and coercion it creates for its members.

Because non-believers are experiencing the deconversion process in the present tense, their experiences are important for the purposes of this thesis and will be further elaborated in chapter five. For the purposes of this chapter, it is important to note that non-believing participants shared a fundamentally similar moral grammar with Ex-Mormons. Perhaps the most notable difference between these groups is that non-believers often included God in their narratives while Ex-Mormons did not. For Ex-Mormons, the Church is merely an organization that creates injustice; there is no God in their moral system. But for non-believing members, the Church misunderstands the demands of a dignitarian and libertarian God, and the members worship the image of the ideal member.

The Disbelievers: The Undaunted Outgroup and the Church's Hate of Otherness

Like non-believers, disbelievers see the Church primarily through the dignitarian imagination which casts the undaunted outgroup as the victim/hero of the ingroup's

injustice. While every focus group showed a high prevalence of the Recognition mode, the dignitarian narratives of disbelievers were distinct in two ways. First, while believers and non-believers appeal to the dignitarian God, there is no God in the moral system of disbelievers. There is only the Church abusing its control over the means of socialization to marginalize outgroups. This does not mean Ex-Mormons are not deists or do not have religious beliefs of some kind. Reiss found that 55% of Ex-Mormons are religiously affiliated, most of whom are Christian.[145] But either because they were not deists, did not wish to out themselves as deists to other participants, or did not find their religious beliefs relevant to the interview questions, disbelievers did not include God in their narratives.

Second, while dignitarian logic was prevalent in every focus group, disbelievers were the only participants to attach purely negative intentions to the Church. For believers, it is the ignorance of the members that creates the image of the ideal member, and this image that marginalizes all who cannot resemble it. For the non-believer it is both the ignorant members and the coercive Church who misunderstand the dignitarian God and its demand for the Christlike treatment of others. But for at least a few of the disbelieving participants, the Church merely hates otherness. It should be noted that most Ex-Mormons did not presume negative intentions for the Church. To the contrary, most can thoroughly and charitably articulate the Church's motivations. Those who presumed bad intentions produced morally clear narratives of a dominant ingroup who hates all those unlike themselves, and wields their cultural, administrative, and economic power to harm them.

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[145] Riess, *The Next Mormons*, 221.

Ex-Mormon Focus Group #1
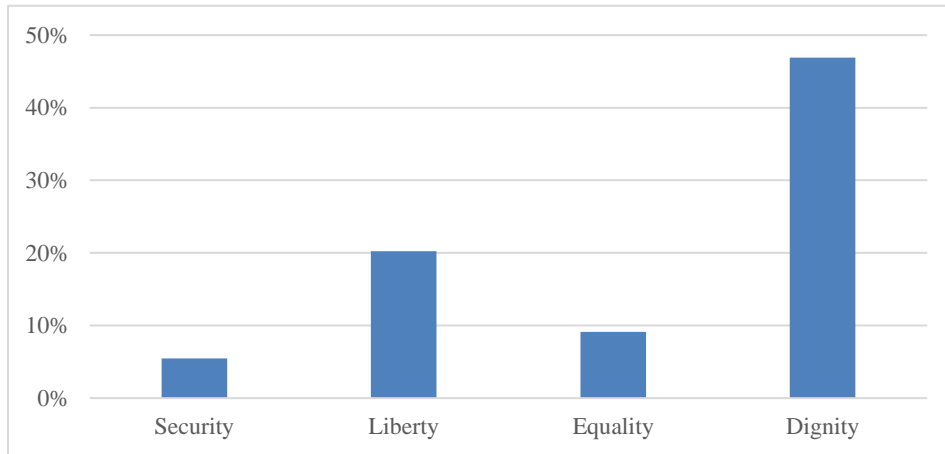
Figure 19. Ex-Mormon #1 Values
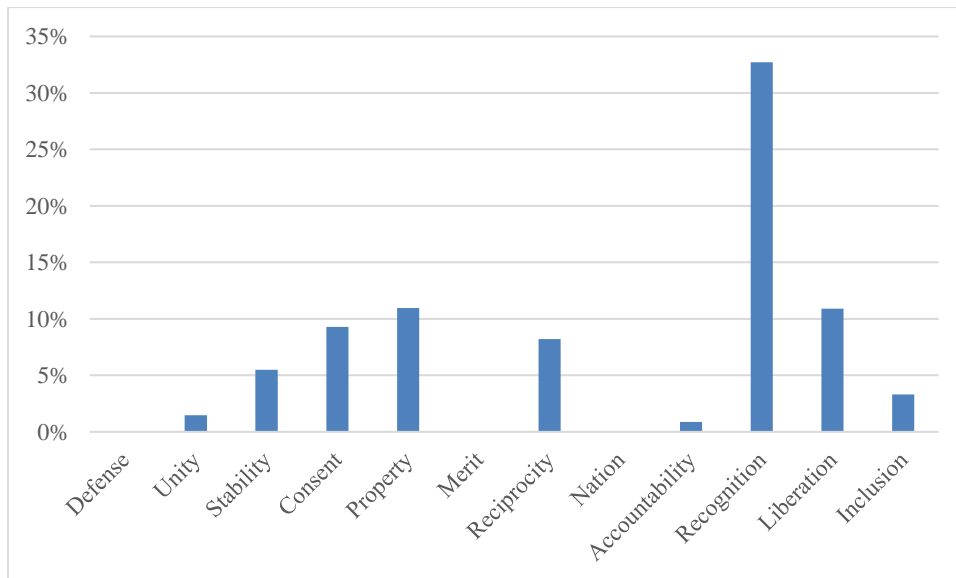
Figure 20. Ex-Mormon #1 Root Narrative Profile

Recognition (33%) is by far the most common narrative mode of the disbelievers and is perhaps most clearly articulated by them. Within these narratives we find a cast of victim/heroes similar to those found in r/exmormon (i.e., LGBTQ+, race and ethnic minorities, women, and other Ex-Mormons). The cause of injustice is clearly articulated as the 'Mormon hate of otherness' that expresses itself everywhere from micro-aggressions to Church policy. From the point of view of Ex-Mormons, the normalizing power of the Church's Stability discourse, the hyper-focus on Church norms creates a community where normality is sought after even outside the covenant behaviors. The image of the ideal member is a heterosexual, white, cis-gender male with orthodox beliefs who is obedient, does not have a sinful past, and votes Republican. Those who do not fit the type are othered, guilted, or shamed by believers within a cultural system created and sustained by Church doctrine. When asked to explain the Church's 2015 policy one participant said the following:

I think the LDS Church hates otherness, and so anything other than like a cis-white human is second tier culturally, well okay, kind of doctrinally, but culturally I think that holds true. And so, I think you would have to understand, again, the whole 'families are forever' concept… everything they do is to influence the family and to put responsibility on you for your family… This is what I heard growing up all the time is that, as a parent, you're responsible for your kids' souls. If they aren't Mormon, you're responsible for that and you're responsible if they go to hell and

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you're going to feel that burden… So, I think you really have to understand that it has

been so unspoken, the LDS hate for others… (EX1, P3)

The belief that families are forever—what was narrated as a "beautiful doctrine" in the

discourse of the believers—is here narrated as an element in a cultural system that

generates injustice for outgroups. The notion that families are forever coupled with the

Church's hate of otherness combines to burden parents with unnecessary guilt and

coerces them to engage in harmful and coercive interactions with their children. Or as P3

said later in the interview, "[the Church] creates such micromanaging parts of every

detail of your life… they have micromanaged it to a point to create such a hostile

environment."

EX1 was also the only place within the study where a significant amount of

egalitarian discourse was found. Reciprocity (8%) and Accountability (1%) were

virtually absent from any other dataset. These narratives were most often found when

disbelievers narrated the intentions of the Church. As already noted, when believers and

non-believers narrate Church members as the villain, they relate the injustice to their

ignorance, not malevolence. But in the narratives of disbelievers, there is no dignitarian

God. To narrate the motivations of the Church and its members, disbelievers often

pivoted to the egalitarian imagination that casts 'the People' as its victim/hero and 'unfair

competition' as its injustice. Within this mode, disbelievers cite the motivations of the

Church as primarily pecuniary. The Church is not interested in meeting the needs of its

members, it is interested in growth and wealth.

I do kind of think that part of the reason they went back on the 2015

announcement was just kind of a last-ditch attempt to wind back some of the

millennial Mormons who were on the fence… It became so much more obvious

to me as I was making my way out of the Church, that it was so much more about

numbers, and especially with maintaining members. My best friend was a Relief

Society President the last semester I was at [the university], and she called me to

be her Assistant, and sitting through those meetings with the Bishopric and

everything was just so painful because I was constantly thinking like, "you guys

aren't here to actually talk about people who are struggling or who need genuine

help." It's just like, "oh, can we get them back to church on Sunday? Like, can't

we get a person in the seat?" And it goes along with not making apologies,

because if you just care about numbers and you're not as concerned with

individual lives and experiences, then why? why apologize if it's not going to do

as much for statistics or whatever? (EX1, P4)

In this quote we see a clear Reciprocity narrative, *Elites use bargaining power to create*

unfair competition for the People. Those in leadership reduce Church members to

numbers on a balance sheet and seek to increase their influence by bringing them to

church. Meeting the needs of the people by helping a struggling individual or apologizing

for a damaging Church policy is eclipsed by the impetus for growth. If it doesn't benefit

the 'bottom line' it isn't valued by the institution. Like Karl Marx's consideration of

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commodity fetishism and alienation, the *commodification* of Church members is narrated as an alienating force that takes people from their nature as cooperative or supportive beings.[146]

Similar to the r/exmormon dataset, EX1 also demonstrated a significant amount of libertarian discourse with Property at 11% and Consent at 9%. In both r/exmormon and EX1, disbelievers most often utilize this mode to push back on the securitarian discourse of the Church wherein they argue religion is necessary for a morally good and stable society.

Right after I got married, after I went through the sealing, I sat there and I was like, "I feel nothing." And that was that big moment where I was just like, "what am I doing here? Why am I ruining my wedding day for something that I [don't] believe in?" So right after that I decided to just not go. And it was very heartbreaking because I've had so many people tell me that, oh, if you don't go to church, you're not going to get these blessings, you're not going to get this thing in your life that you want. Like, and I really tried to research how to make decisions on my own without trying to figure out praying and trying to find an answer, because I was never given one, I was never 'whispered' one. The 'signs' I got was like a billboard on a drive. And I realized that now I should be able to make my own decisions. I'm an adult. Like, be kind and I can still love people… I decided to be a good human being because I want to be a good human being. I want to be kind to people because I want to be kind to people. Not

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146 Marx, *Capital*.

because if I don't, I lose my temple recommend like, as a consequence. I have no

consequences. (EX1, P2)

In this quote, P2 narrates the spiritual incentives found in the discourse of President Nelson and Church members as unnecessary. She is good because she wants to be, not because the Church has coerced her. The spiritual blessings (i.e., eternal marriage and spiritual promptings) so important to the covenantal transaction were never there to begin with. In fact, P2 narrates the *temple sealing*—the Latter-day Saint marriage ceremony—as playing a role in ruining her wedding day. The victim/hero in this narrate is the rational individual (i.e., 'I'm an adult') who studies how to make decisions rather than relying to on an empty mysticism.

Ex-Mormon Focus Group #2
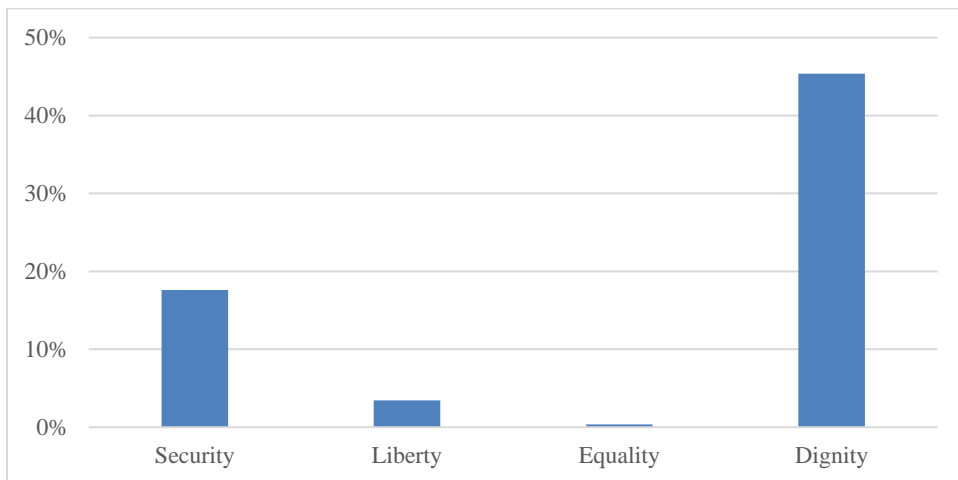
Figure 21. Ex-Mormon #2 Values
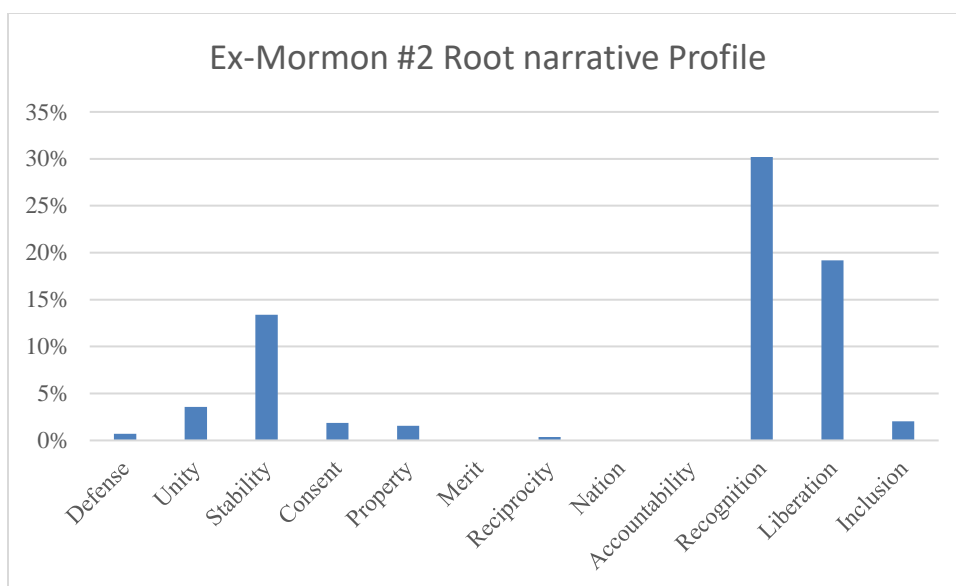
Figure 22. Ex-Mormon #2 Root Narrative Profile

While there were two gay participants in both Ex-Mormon focus groups, EX2 is unique in that it is the smallest group (with only two participants), entirely comprised of gay participants. While EX1showed more egalitarian and libertarian discourse than most of the datasets analyzed herein, EX2 showed perhaps the lowest of both. And while the dignitarian discourse of EX2 was not fundamentally different from EX1, they utilized Liberation more often. EX2 was also unlike r/exmormon in that disbelievers were clearly speaking through either Liberation (19.19%) or Recognition (30.20%), rather than the synthesis of the two. And finally, EX2 showed a higher amount of securitarian discourse than any other Ex-Mormon dataset.

The disbelievers in EX2 demonstrated a keen ability to understand the Church's Stability discourse, and also told stories within the same narrative mode. Both Stability and Recognition are story structures about the ignorant masses creating injustice with

biased folkways, and participants demonstrated an ability to naturally flow from one to the other. Participants would begin talking about Church members marginalizing outgroups but would pivot to Stability when they considered the Church's sexual norms. For example, in the quote below we see P1 begin with a Recognition narrative wherein the dignitarian values of Christlike attributes are distinguished from Church 'culture' and teenagers (i.e., the outgroup) are alienated from their sexual experience because of a dated system of sex education (i.e., biased folkways).

> So, I have a [family member] that recently was talking to me, and she said her and her husband… they've been questioning their membership… We were talking a lot about like… what it means to be a Christian versus what happens culturally within the Church and what's reinforced by Church leaders… one of my biggest frustrations is, and since going into education, I think The For Strength of Youth is like very teddy bear, like sugar coated, like as far as teenagers going through puberty and having their sexual awakening I think that it's a very dated perspective of that… they definitely support abstinence only sex ed… But I just think they really alienate their sexual experiences from the human experience. (EX2, P1)

While P1 is here speaking through the Recognition mode, he quickly pivots to a Stability mode when he considers STIs and the societal effects of abstinence-only sex education.

And then I hear so many stories of people getting married, and they have so many

issues because they haven't been educated properly on what to expect when you

[are] first having sex… like maybe one of them had sex secretly and then they

might have an STI. Like one of my [family members]… she didn't even know for

like 10 years that she had HPV and it's just like this lack of education and people

just learning these things because it happens to them. So, I think that's really

wrong. (EX2, P1)

Here P1 maintains the same villain (i.e., the ignorant masses), but pivots to a Stability

story where their biased folkways are not a marginalizing force, but the cause of physical

deprivation (i.e., sexually transmitted infections) within society (i.e., the victim/hero). P1

then continues to blend both Recognition and Stability to narrate the Church's sexual

norms during confession rituals.

There's nothing appropriate about an adult man alone with a teenage girl in a

room and she is telling him what she does by herself sexually… The culture and

ritual of confession should probably evolve… They're trying to adjust how they

do that, like maybe they should have a parent there or a Relief Society or Young

Woman President there or something; someone that's making it less of a

stigmatized predator-type situation. (EX2, P1)

Here we see a powerful ingroup (i.e., adult man), using biased folkways (i.e., the culture and ritual of confession) to marginalize (i.e., stigmatize) a minority (i.e., teenage girl), but we also see a 'splice' of the Stability mode wherein the same villain is creating physical deprivation (i.e., predator-type situation).

By spending more time discussing the Church's sexual norms, EX2 dived into issues other focus groups did not. They also tended to consider physical deprivation more often than other focus groups, even when they were not speaking through a securitarian mode. For example, in the quote below P2 discusses suicide, but does not cite the victim/hero as the Nation, society, or one of the other cognate concepts of the securitarian mode. Instead, the protagonist is the outgroup suffering under the marginalizing effects of the Church's 2015 policy.

> The Church's entire doctrine is based off of a male and female union and it goes all the way into like temple ceremony, like there's no getting around it. And so, it was confusing to me, but at the same time not surprising to me that [the Church] did something like that… The thing that made me probably the most upset about it is like the correlation of like suicide and queer kids, especially in Utah after that came out. When I lived in Utah, I was a part of Encircle which is a safe place for queer people who are leaving the church [or] have already left the Church. And there was a lot of talk around that, a lot of people that died after that came out because they had been trying to make it work and then it was like a huge, a huge like, I don't know, just a really bad thing. (EX2, P2)

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In this strong Liberation mode, P2 tells the story of LGBTQ+ teenagers who were trying to remain in the Church despite the damaged identity the Church had created for them. At the onset of the 2015 policy, the experience of marginalization becomes so intense that members of the outgroup no longer want to exist. Suicide is perhaps the most troubling effect of marginalizing forces.

The 2015 policy was a pivotal moment in the conflict, and all but 2 of this studies' 25 participants agreed it was a significant event. But it was perhaps more significant for this studies' LGBTQ+ participants whose experiences were not those of a third party frustrated at an injustice, but the very people for whom the injustice was directed. Listening to LGBTQ+ participants articulate their views and share their experience of the 2015 policy and its redaction in 2019 was similar to hearing Americans tell their experiences of September 11, 2001 or listening to ex-combatants tell stories of the Troubles in Northern Ireland. The 2015 policy has the makings of what Abbott calls a *masterplot*, or what Stephen Jay Gould calls a *canonical story*.[147] The policy and its redaction are not just a story but are perhaps becoming a part of the very structure of the post-Mormon community. It was a pivotal moment for many when moral realities became clear; it is a story wherein the Church that claims divine guidance first revealed its hate of otherness, and then, after a significant loss of membership, revealed its moral absolutism is only subservient to its impetus for growth. Both r/exmormon and the focus

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[147] Abbott, *The Cambridge Introduction to Narrative*, 47.

group interviews demonstrate the moral system of post-Mormonism is dignitarian, and the 2015 policy seems to be its canonical story.

Comparing the Data

By triangulating the two datasets of this study—the representative discourse from ritualistic gathering places and focus group interviews—we see a cohesive story of conflict between a securitarian Church and its dignitarian malcontents. But as argued in chapter one, conflict is complex. By comparing and contrasting the two datasets we learn nuances about the conflict. In this section, the focus groups and ritualistic discourse are compared and contrasted, suggesting details about the conflict that should be considered in future research.

The Church and Ex-Mormons

The ritualistic discourse of Latter-day Saints and Ex-Mormons as well as the Ex-Mormon focus groups tell a common story. The dominant moral grammar of the Church and its members is securitarian, and the dominant moral grammar of Ex-Mormons is dignitarian. What the Church sees as its primary method of overcoming abusive power is seen by Ex-Mormons as an abuse of power; and what Ex-Mormons see as their primary method of overcoming abusive power is seen by the Church as an abusive power. In other words, the Church and Ex-Mormons are in a state of conflict.

In President Nelson's conference address "Spiritual Treasures," he acknowledges the feminist Ordain Women movement within the Church and responds to their concerns.

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While Nelson briefly entered the dignitarian imagination to cite the concerns of women, he quickly pivoted back to the Stability mode through which they were reoriented. Rather than consider the concerns of women *as* women, Nelson considers the interests of women as Church members. This is an important difference between the securitarian and dignitarian imaginations. The former sees the Nation (i.e., Church) as the hero/villain and tends to see a society of equals. Liberal democratic governments often speak through this mode when they assert, "equal justice before the law." In the same mode, Nelson sees differing gender roles as morally irrelevant—men and women are separate but equal. What is morally relevant is not that one holds the priesthood and the other does not, it is whether both have equal access to spiritual blessings. This salvific co-equality is perhaps the main point of Nelson's address; men and women have distinct roles but equal access to spiritual blessings through priesthood ordinances. Differences in gender roles do not matter to Nelson because God distributes love and blessings equally through the covenant (i.e., social contract). Spiritual safety comes not through focusing on our differences, but through obedience to the covenant. Nelson acknowledges dignitarian concerns but responds to them squarely within the securitarian Stability mode.

The moral grammar of Ex-Mormons is primarily dignitarian. For Ex-Mormons, the fundamental concern is not access to spiritual blessings through the Church's social contract; their primary concern is not physical/spiritual deprivation at all. What Nelson sees as morally irrelevant, Ex-Mormons see as the fundamental issue. The disparate treatment between straight, cis-gendered white men with culturally orthodox views and all the outgroups that do not fit that description are not co-equal. While all may have

equal access to the spiritual blessings, that does not mean they are treated with equal value in Church experience. Patriarchy, racism, heteronormativity, and religious dogmas create a hierarchy of value wherein non-male, non-white, gay, non-Mormon or unorthodox persons are given damaged identities they cannot escape through right behavior. No matter how strictly they obey the Mormon code, they will always be treated as second class citizens within the Church. Within this dignitarian mode, liberation from the hierarchy of value occurs by exiting the Church and deconstructing the hierarchy for others.

Within these modes, it can be difficult for the securitarian Church to understand its dignitarian malcontents. But from EX1 and EX2 we see that, as former members raised in the Church, Ex-Mormons do understand the Church's moral logic. They can thoroughly cite the Church's justifications of the 2015 policy in the same moral grammar, and even apply that grammar to other issues. The Ex-Mormons who best articulated the Church's moral grammar were also those who tended not to presume Church leaders had purely negative intentions. Understanding the other's moral grammar seems to allow a person to see them with complexity. And while that does not mean the participant does not experience conflict or see the other as abusive, it may be useful for resolving conflict. These participants still see the discourse of the Church as morally irrelevant because the *securitarian* God does not exist; and the Church's hierarchy of value still marginalizes all those who do not fit the image of the ideal member. But the ability to see the causers of marginalization as different or ignorant rather than evil may be helpful for the purposes of conflict resolution. This should be considered in future research and tested in practice.

The Church and its Non-Believing Members

The moral system differences between the Church and its non-believing members are not fundamentally different than the differences between the Church and Ex-Mormons. However, there is one difference worth noting. In the narratives of Ex-Mormons there is no dignitarian God; there is only the Church and its abuse of the means of socialization. While non-believing members have agnostic orientations—they either believe God is different than the Church claims or have suspended belief altogether—they assert the Church and its members have misunderstood God. While the Church narrates a securitarian God who demands obedience to the covenant behaviors of abstinence and sacrifice, non-believers narrate a dignitarian God who demands Christlike virtues of accepting the marginalized other and non-coercion.

While the Church sees itself as a family-oriented organization who builds strong and everlasting family ties, the non-believers see a fundamentally different organization. The Church sees itself through the canonical story of the *great apostasy* and the *restoration*. In this historical narrative, after the time after the death of Jesus' apostles and the first vision of Joseph Smith Jr., there is a period when the priesthood (i.e., the authority to act in God's name) was missing from the earth. Through the revelations and heavenly ministrations experienced by Smith, this authority was restored.[148] Central to this restoration was the authority to bind families together on earth and in heaven. The Church sees itself as the only institution through which families can be together forever.

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[148] Talmage, *The Great Apostasy*; Bushman, *Joseph Smith*.

One of the reasons why the Church spends so much of its discourse narrating right behaviors, is because obedience is what members must do to hold up their end of the covenant and remain families in the eternities. This focus on Stability is (presumably) aimed at creating more right behavior, so more families can be together forever. Within the Church's Stability mode, it is a humanitarian organization strengthening families in both the here and the hereafter

As the at-risk members of a family worried for its collective salvation, non-believers see the Church and its believing members as a marginalizing and coercive force in their lives. Non-believers speak more often than any other members in dignitarian modes, and they also speak less often than any other member in securitarian modes. Non-believing members see the Church as an institution that creates unnecessary conflict in the lives of its members by making them feel unworthy of love and acceptance. As new parents, they do not want their children to grow up in the same destructive environment that taught them to live in fear and self-hate. Neither do they want their children to be coerced by adults or other children into making covenants they cannot understand at eight years of age (when Latter-day Saints usually make baptismal covenants). In the narratives of non-believers, the Church is not an institution who builds strong and everlasting family ties, but an institution and community that disrupts family ties and misunderstands the dignitarian God and the libertarian God.

The Church and its Believing Members

While President Nelson (the authoritative leader of the Church) and the members of the Church both speak from a securitarian moral grammar, there are important differences between them. From Nelson's position of leadership, he speaks primarily through the Stability mode, incentivizing members to engage in right behavior to overcome the sins of the world. While remaining within the securitarian imagination, the members of both LDS focus groups speak most often from the Unity mode from which they cite the blessings of Church and community and note their duty to God as a higher purpose that quells factionalism and dissent. While Nelson sees himself creating moral order in a world of chaos, Church members see themselves fostering community through devotion. Thus, we see the stabilizing leaders and the unifying members.

However, while President Nelson does not speak through the dignitarian imagination, the members speak through it often. By distinguishing between the 'Church' and the 'culture,' the members are able to value both a securitarian God and its community of believers as well as the dignitarian God and its Christlike virtues. The dignitarian discourse of the members blames the marginalization of outgroups squarely on ignorant members (i.e., Church culture) and their image of the ideal member. The Church and its doctrine are narrated as morally good force that fosters community and a deep sense of meaning that *ought to* transcend the factionalism between the members—who put the covenant-norms above the Christlike virtues—and the Ex-Mormons who, as numerous participants noted, 'see things differently than we do.'

While there are differences between the dignitarian discourse of believers, non-believers, and disbelievers, that narratives of marginalization are prominent in every focus group has implications. Whatever or whomever is at fault, the members exist in an environment in which even orthodox believers feel marginalized. Perhaps it is the fault of President Nelson and other Church leaders whose discourse creates the image of the ideal member. Perhaps it is the members who do not understand the demands of a dignitarian God. Perhaps it is a changing society who creates moral expectations the Church cannot meet while staying true to orthodoxy. And perhaps it is all three or none of these explanations. While the Church's role in deconversion-conflict will be considered in chapter five, the position of this thesis is that there is no singular cause of conflict—which is complex and impossible to fully understand. The evaluative point of this paragraph is that virtually all participants feel they do not belong; they narrate a sense of alienation that should be considered in future research.

The Believing Members and Ex-Mormons

Believing members speak mostly from the Unity narrative from which they cite the blessings of Church community and argue that duty to God is a higher purpose that could quell factionalism and dissent if only the other believed. But former members speak mostly from a Recognition mode in which they cite the marginalizing effects of Church norms and the damaged identities outgroups cannot escape through the Church's notions of right behavior. While believing members also speak through the Recognition mode, their distinction between the 'Church' and the 'culture' allows them to blame the

marginalization of outgroups squarely on other members who do not understand the demands of a dignitarian God. Ex-Mormons are different in this regard. While some Ex-Mormons distinguish between the Church and the culture, the distinction does not have the same moral meaning; regardless of the religious (or non-religious) views of the Ex-Mormon, it is both the Church and the members who are responsible for the marginalization of outgroups.

When Ex-Mormons speak through the Liberation mode, it is the Church instead of the members who are primarily responsible for the outgroup's marginalization. Church policy, doctrine, and orthopraxy create a system in which Church leaders have control over the means of socialization and administration (i.e., Church Government). And with their control they create the image of the ideal member—Jesus Christ. The Church tells its members not only to believe in a white, cis-gendered male Jesus, who held orthodox beliefs and whose perfect behavior allowed him to create the covenant between God and humankind;[149] they are told to be like him. The securitarian Jesus does not tolerate homosexuality and creates a Church order that is fundamentally faith-based and explicitly patriarchal. The more like this Jesus one is, the more acceptable they are in the securitarian Church; and the less like this Jesus one is, the less acceptable they are. It is this Church, this Jesus, and this hierarchy of value the Ex-Mormon seeks to overcome.

When Believing members spoke through the Unity mode, they appeal to the high values of community, love, and justify peace between differing views of God. The rules and norms of the Church are a mere setting in which true religion can take place—and

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[149] For a Mormon theology on Jesus as the creator of the covenant, see James E. Talmage, *Jesus the Christ*.

true religion is a oneness between one member and another and all members with their God. Criticism, doubt, and identity differences are eclipsed by the higher purpose of oneness. In this mode, it is the sacrifice of Jesus Christ—the atonement or 'at-one-ment'—that believers are called to emulate. God so loved the world that he sent his only son, and the son so loved the Father that he sacrificed himself to bring God and humankind together once again. By emulating this Jesus, members are called to transcend their identity differences, and sacrifice for God and each other. It is this doctrine, this Church, and the values of love, charity, and oneness believing members obey and utilize to overcome the doubt and criticism of disbelievers, as well as the sins of the world.

The Believing and Non-Believing Members

Because non-believing members and Ex-Mormons are fundamentally similar in their root narratives (discussed more below), most of the significant differences between non-believing and believing members can be understood by reading the sub-section above. However, aside from what is included in the above section, there are two differences worth considering. First, non-believers speak more often through a dignitarian mode and less often in a securitarian mode than any other member. Second, while believers narrate Church members as the singular cause of outgroups' marginalization, non-believers do not. It is both the Church and the culture that marginalize the outgroup and coerce the individual.

Ex-Mormons and Non-Believing Members

Ex-Mormons and non-believing members do not have any fundamental differences in their root narrative profile—each show a prominence of dignitarian narratives and some libertarian, securitarian, and egalitarian narratives. However, there are two noteworthy differences worth mentioning. First, in the narratives of Ex-Mormons there is no dignitarian God; there is only the Church and its abuse of the means of socialization. While non-believing members have agnostic orientations—they either believe God is different than the Church claims God to be, or they have suspended judgement on faith-based beliefs—they often claim the Church and its members have misunderstood a dignitarian or libertarian God. Second, non-believers spend more time articulating the internal experience of the marginalized outgroup while Ex-Mormons spend more time narrating the internal experience of the marginalizing ingroup. Non-believers clearly articulate the way Church norms foster an internalized sense of guilt and shame—a damaged identity one cannot easily escape, despite their moral goodness. Ex-Mormons spend more time discussing the 'Mormon hate of otherness.'

EX2 and the Undecided focus group may have also been the most generative focus groups. Both spent significant time narrating their concern for children, teenagers, and the future of human society. In Dan McAdams book, "The Redemptive Self" he argues generative adults share six story themes: early advantage, suffering of others, moral depth, steadfastness, redemption, power vs. love, and future growth. While my interview questions did not seek to bring out any of these story elements, EX2 and the Undecided

focus group noticeably expressed four of them—suffering of others, moral depth, power vs. love, and redemption.[150]

Conclusion

The data analyzed in this thesis tell at least two stories. First, when the discourse of all focus group participants is taken into account, by far the most common mode is the Recognition root narrative that considers the undaunted outgroup as the victim/hero of the ingroup's marginalization. Most participants narrate a sense of alienation that suggests a longing to belong. Believing members see guilt, shame, and marginalization as caused by the image of the ideal member—a biased folkway caused by Church culture but not by the Church or its doctrine. Non-believing members see fear, self-hatred, and marginalization as caused by the Church, its members, and their collective misunderstanding of the dignitarian God. Disbelieving Ex-Mormons see the marginalization of outgroups as caused by the Mormon hate of otherness within the hearts of members and inherent in Church doctrine and organizational structure. While all participants narrate differently, they share a common feeling that they do not belong. While this may be caused by deconversion-conflict and will be discussed further in the next chapter, a thorough consideration of this finding is beyond scope of this thesis and should be considered by future research.

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[150] McAdams, *The Redemptive Self*.

Second, both the ritualistic discourse of Latter-day Saints and Ex-Mormons and the focus group interviews analyzed herein reveal that the Church and Ex-Mormons are in a state of conflict. The dominant moral grammar of the Church and its members is securitarian, and the dominant moral grammar of Ex-Mormons is dignitarian. What the Church and its members see as their primary methods of overcoming abusive power (i.e., righteous behavior and a higher purpose) is seen by Ex-Mormons as an abuse of power (i.e., marginalizing norms); and what Ex-Mormons see as their primary method of overcoming abusive power (i.e., deconstructing a hierarchy of value) is seen by the Church as an abusive power (i.e., norms that cause spiritual/physical deprivation).

However, deconversion-conflict is unique from other types of social conflict. The Church and Ex-Mormons are not competing over tangible resources like land, money, or control over the reins of government. It is the conversion of believers, the deconversion of disbelievers, and the disparate moral systems that blossom from their unique experiences that serve as the root of their conflict. Of course, a mere difference in moral systems does not necessarily create conflict. I, as an American male have never experienced conflict with a Bangladeshi female despite our (presumably) distinct moral systems. Because believers and disbelievers exist within the same social network wherein they experience no *social proximity* (i.e., being in the same families, friends groups, communities, or not), fundamentally different moral systems can cause fractures in their relationship. Thus, deconversion-conflict is the result of at least two intersecting factors: close social proximity and disparate moral systems. In deconversion-conflict, the parties have already experienced a deep sense of care and attachment. But their care does not

save them from destructive relational patterns. To the contrary, because of the nature of their disparate moral systems, *care* itself is weaponized and expressed in destructive ways. What the believer sees as the disbeliever's salvation from spiritual/physical harm, the disbeliever sees as a fundamental disrespect of their forming identity. And what the disbeliever sees as the believer's liberation from unnecessary self-hate, the believer sees as a threat to their spiritual/physical safety.

In the next chapter I analyze the focus group interview data not as a 'moral grammarian' but as a 'grounded theorist' to tell the story deconversion-conflict in its intrapersonal, interpersonal, and structural dimensions. In this story I discuss how disparate moral systems function within the social networks of disbelievers to fracture relationships and generate conflict. And in concluding this thesis I offer some suggestions for a future practice of deconversion-conflict resolution.

CHAPTER 5. DECONVERSION AS CONFLICT

An individual's shift from religious belief to disbelief can be difficult to understand both for the non-believer and their believing friends and family. Not only must the non-believer reevaluate their view of themselves and others, their ideologies, beliefs and values, but must often do so with mounting social pressures from what would otherwise be a network of social support. Furthermore, they must often do so from a place of emotional and perhaps cognitive uncertainty when all that is known is that nothing is known. Psychologist Marlene Winell describes this as "[feeling] like a trapeze artist suspended in midair."[151] Religious psychology has long studied deconversion as an intrapersonal phenomenon, leaving deconversion as a social phenomenon relatively unexplored. In chapters two, three, and four I analyzed the narratives of the Church, its believing members, its doubting members, and Ex-Mormons, and found that the Church and Ex-Mormons tell combative moral stories with opposing heroes, villains, powers abused, and harms caused. Each group sees the world through distinct moral systems that privilege differing values. Distinct moral systems within close social proximity can cause conflict by causing care for the other to be expressed in destructive ways.

In this chapter I refer to the interview data collected in chapter five, the moral systems of each group, and previous literature on Ex-Mormons to inform a theory of deconversion as conflict. While this includes a consideration of the intrapersonal experience of non-believers, I primarily explore the social dimensions of deconversion. I

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[151] Winell, *Leaving the Fold*, 11.

begin with the onset of doubt and discuss the internal struggle of shifting from belief to non-belief. I consider the social pressures that influence the non-believer's long and lonely road out of the Church. I then discuss the qualitative change in the deconversion process when believers become aware of the doubt or disbelief of the transitioning person and give broad recommendations for each to heal from the pain within them and reconcile the relationship between them. I conclude with a consideration of the socio-structural elements of the deconversion-conflict and recommendations for future research.

As discussed in chapter one, conflict is an infinite interplay of incalculable variables that may never be fully understood. However, conflict does not need to be fully understood to be resolved. Conflict resolution requires a theory that identifies the causes of the conflict and informs intervention to address those causes. Unlike previous chapters, this one is not merely descriptive but prescriptive. I propose intervention strategies with a particular end in mind—to help believers and disbelievers preserve chosen relationships, reconcile fractured relationships, and allow both to heal from the loss and pain experienced during deconversion. Believers and disbelievers have already experienced love in their sameness, but if they are to experience love in their difference, they must identify the role they play in creating conflict and work together to resolve it.[152]

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[152] I owe the phrases "love in their sameness" and "love in their difference" to Annalisa Jackson who articulated this distinction much better than I could.

The Mechanisms of Wellbeing for Religious Persons

Religion has long been concerned with and played a role in the wellbeing of humankind. This is true from prehistoric medicine men and priests who cared for both the physical and religious needs of the tribe to the present day.[153] While religion was not considered a separate and distinct part of life until the European enlightenment,[154] this distinction is integral to Western thought, prompting the sui generis study of religious psychology and *religion and health*. This body of research has consistently found correlations between religiosity and an increase in wellbeing. In their collection of systematic reviews found in the "Handbook of Religion and Health," Harold G. Koenig, Dana E. King, and Verna Benner Carson demonstrated that 78-79%[155] of quantitative studies have found religiosity associated with an increase in health and wellbeing, and the studies that differed from this conclusion were either inconclusive or had serious methodological errors.[156] They found that the vast majority of quantitative studies (between 71-87%) have reported positive correlations between religiosity/spirituality (R/S) and less depression, faster recovery from depression, lower suicidal ideation and behaviors, and greater marriage stability, as well as negative correlations with alcohol and drug abuse, crime and delinquency, and some personality disorders such as

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[153] Koenig, King, and Carson, *Handbook of Religion and Health*, 15–34.

[154] Armstrong, *Fields of Blood*.

[155] 78% of qualitative studies before the year 2000 demonstrated a positive correlation between religiosity and reported well-being, and from 2000-2012 79% of qualitative studies have also reported a positive correlation.

[156] Koenig, King, and Carson, *Handbook of Religion and Health*, 144.

narcissistic, borderline, and antisocial disorders. Perhaps the only measure in which religious persons perform worse is in the number of patients with psychotic disorders.[157]

While it is clear religious persons experience greater wellbeing than non-religious persons, it is less clear what about R/S provides physical and psychological benefits.[158] Researchers have attempted to isolate religious mechanisms that may contribute to increased wellbeing but have had limited success in demonstrating causal links. This has led Koenig, King, Carson, Alexander Moreira-Almeida, Francisco Lotufo Neto, and others to advocate for multifactorial theories which identify religious mechanisms of wellbeing and argue these factors work together in ways that are difficult to observe.

As an example of one prominent multifactorial theory, Moreira-Almeida, Neto and Koenig list six factors to explain the R/S-wellbeing correlation. First, several psychological illnesses are linked with our behaviors and lifestyle. Because many religions prescribe treating the body as temple, observing a day of rest, and moderation or abstinence from the use of harmful substances, they inculcate healthier lifestyles. Second, belonging to a group often provides psychosocial benefits in the form of consistent social relationships, and social support during stressful times. Third, religious beliefs can provide support by enhancing acceptance, endurance, and resilience, as well as fostering an internal locus of control. Fourth, religious practices can help individuals cope with anxiety, anomie, isolation, and negative emotions. This may assist in the prevention of mental disease and the maintenance of mental health. As Kenneth I. Pargament considers

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[157] Ibid.
[158] Moreira-Almeida, Neto, and Koenig, "Religiousness and Mental Health."

at length in his book "The Psychology of Religion and Coping," religious coping is helpful for giving traumatic life events significance and is often more compelling to religious persons than non-religious coping.[159] However, religious beliefs can also enhance feelings of guilt, doubts, and anxiety, which will be considered below. Fifth, spiritual direction is a benefit on its own which helps in finding meaning in life and fosters personal growth. Moreira-Almeida, et. al. notes, this factor has similarities with psychotherapy. And sixth, religions can provide idioms to express stress.[160] While researchers have had limited success in isolating these factors and increasing their links to increased wellbeing, religion is a multidimensional phenomenon, and the way these mechanisms work together is likely inconsistent across a diversity of religious communities.

Some multifactorial theories have attempted to model the link between religiosity and wellbeing such as that of Koenig, King and Carson. Their model begins with belief in God, "belief in, relationship with, and attachment to God are the sources that initiate and guide the development of religious practices, commitments, experiences, and coping behaviors within Christianity and other Western religious traditions."[161] Belief is pivotal throughout the believers' *formation* (i.e., religious training) as religious beliefs form their *cognitive appraisal*, or rather, "the worldview through which all negative and positive life events and circumstances must pass...before being consciously perceived."[162] A cognitive

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[159] Pargament, *The Psychology of Religion and Coping*.
[160] Moreira-Almeida, Neto, and Koenig, "Religiousness and Mental Health."
[161] Koenig, King, and Carson, *Handbook of Religion and Health*, 309.
[162] Ibid., 310.

appraisal that assumes all life events have meaning, that God is in control, etc. can foster

feelings of safety—which as Judith Lewis Herman notes, is the first step in recovery from

trauma.[163] Belief leads to religious training and peer influences as well as religious

practice, ritual, commitment, experiences, and a toolkit of religious coping skills which,

together, can influence individual choices, as well as foster human virtues, life

experiences and environmental circumstances that positively affect mental health.[164]

      While multifactorial theories identify numerous mechanisms of wellbeing for

religious persons, they rely on a hypothesis that is difficult to test. If these mechanisms

work together in ways that are difficult to observe, how are we to test causality?

Multifactorial theories attempt to explain a correlation as a causation but provide no

method of testing this assertion. Furthermore, these theories consider non-religious

persons as dependent variables against which the benefits of religiosity can be tested.

Even if multifactorial theories could test causation, they are incomplete without asking

comparable questions of the non-religious disbelievers.

      This thesis is not a quantitative study that tests the religious mechanisms of

wellbeing, but it does have something to say about the emotional core driving the

research questions of such studies. As Simmons has argued, root narratives are the

primitive grammar of political discourse; we cannot narrate social issues without them.

The religious psychologists cited above have articulated their theory within the Stability

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163 Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*.
164 Koenig, King, and Carson, *Handbook of Religion and Health*, 308

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root narrative utilized by President Nelson.[165] They see non-religious persons (i.e., the masses) engaging in non-affiliation and disbelief (i.e., biased folkways) creating a decrease in wellbeing (i.e., spiritual/physical deprivation) in society (i.e., the nation). And like President Nelson, they are unaware of the disparate reality of the non-religious persons. They consider religious persons (i.e., the protagonist) and do not consider non-religious persons (i.e., the antagonist). They ask research questions that follow the securitarian logic of their moral system and do not ask the questions that make sense in disparate moral systems.

Now that we have considered the narratives of disbelievers, we can propose critiques of multifactorial theory within their dignitarian imagination. Herein I limit myself to two: the first is an original critique of multifactorial theorists using non-religiosity and disbelief as dependent variables, and the second is found in the existing literature. First, in her book *Widen the Window*, Elizabeth Stanley notes that a loss of belief is itself a spiritual symptom of dysregulation.[166] This suggests that those who lose their religious belief may do so precisely *because* they are traumatized. Trauma, especially in early childhood, increases the likelihood of mental illness and increases the likelihood of future trauma since dysregulated persons may be unable to distinguish legitimate threats from illegitimate ones.[167] Because loss of belief is a symptom of dysregulation, it is possible that traumatized people leave religious institutions at higher

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[165] As a former heart surgeon and current Church President, Nelson may be aware of religion and health research.
[166] Stanley, *Widen the Window*, 212.
[167] Ibid.

rates than non-traumatized people. If enough people become disbelievers because they are traumatized and dysregulated, then the dependent variable religious psychologists are using to test the benefits of religiosity will give them spurious correlations. This opens up the possibility that the R/S-wellbeing correlation has less to do with uniquely religious mechanisms and more to do with faith-communities' inability to retain traumatized members. Future research should test this possibility.

Second, Olga Stavrova, Detlef Fetchenhauer and Thomas Schlösser found that religious people report being treated with more respect and argue that this is one factor in their reporting higher levels of life satisfaction. This effect is stronger in countries with a dominant negative attitude toward non-religious people. The way people are treated influences many dimensions of their wellbeing. Thus, it is possible that non-religious people may experience diminished wellbeing because they are mistreated by believers. [168] This is consistent with Brewster's argument that atheists in the United States are a minority group who, much like other minority groups in the U.S., have been consistently, pervasively, and sometimes systematically mistreated.[169] And while the focus groups interviewed in this thesis were not a probability sample, participants in every focus group told stories of disbelievers being marginalized, coerced, or otherwise mistreated by believers.

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[168] Stavrova, Fetchenhauer, and Schlösser, "Why Are Religious People Happy?"
[169] Brewster, *Atheists in America*.

My mom grew up in a very less active home and her brother was excommunicated when she was little, so it caused a lot of, kind of, black sheep type of looking at their family. And this kind of changed my view a little bit about what it's like to be a church member, because not only did I see what P2 and P3 were talking about where it was a great community…but I also saw the hurt that came from it as well…it helps me to really understand what it's like to be an outsider without being on the outside, I hope that makes sense. Anyway, but also, I'm grateful that I grew up in that type of environment, because my mom growing up seeing the negative effects of being a member really tried to teach us to be the best that we could be to everyone around us. And that's what I try to hold on to and look to when I'm looking at members of the Church… I hope for [those] kind Christlike attributes. (LDS1, P1)

So, our babies were premature, and they were spending time in the NICU. And my mom asked about meals and she's like… "are you guys just not going to church anymore?... I hope these boys aren't punished for you breaking your covenants." And I was like "so first of all, what are you talking about as covenants because [in] my understanding [of] covenants, I'm not breaking [any], but you're thinking like word of wisdom, going to church every Sunday, blah blah blah as covenants, they aren't in my book." But yeah, she's like now fearful, she's like, "well just remember the farther you go away the more help you're not going to get from the Lord… he's not going to help you at all." (UD1, P2)

like, I'm sorry, but if the first thing that you want [is for] us to love one another,

do it, no if ands or buts. If you believe love the person not the sin, do it. Like as

toxic as that is, you're supposed to love others as your neighbor; it doesn't matter,

they don't. It was proven that they didn't. They didn't care. (EX1, P2)

Depending on how pervasive and deep the mistreatment, it is possible non-religious

persons experience diminished wellbeing because they are mistreated by believers.

As the author of these critiques, I too cannot articulate social issues without

speaking though the primitive grammar of root narratives. Each of these critiques see

discrepant health outcomes through a dignitarian moral system that suggests a dominant

religious society (i.e., the masses) may be using its control over the means of

socialization (i.e., biased folkways or policy) to coerce or marginalize (i.e., create cultural

disrespect) for disbelievers (i.e., the outgroup). Regardless of whether one is telling a

good story or giving a well-formed argument, all social issues are spoken through a

primitive moral grammar that can explain entire worlds all while ignoring the

implications of other moral grammars.

The Intrapersonal Dimensions of Deconversion-Conflict

What is true of religious and non-religious persons generally seems true within

the Latter-day Saint context as well. In Utah, the capital of the Mormon faith, religiosity

(measured by church attendance) is correlated with an increase in mental health.[170]

However, the effects of deconversion within the Ex-Mormon community have received

very little attention from psychologists employing quantitative methods. When searching

EBSCO's APA Psycinfo database with the keyword "Ex-Mormon," there were only two

relevant results, one of which only dealt with LGB Ex-Mormons, an important but

minority subset of the population. When searching EBSCO's APA Psycharticles, there

were no results under the keyword "Ex-Mormon." Google Scholar found only two

relevant articles, neither were quantitative nor able to demonstrate their generalizability.

But what the few studies of Ex-Mormon wellbeing lack in generalizability, they

make up for in depth. In Brooks' ethnography of Ex-Mormons, he refers to their loss of

faith as a "world collapse" in which the "all-encompassing symbolic-existential

framework of reality once provided by religion disintegrated once they lost faith in

the...Church."[171] Brooks argues that the symptoms of those who experience world

collapse resemble depression, anxiety, dissociation and paranoia, but are unique enough

to be considered a *cultural syndrome*—a culture-bound syndrome restricted to the Latter-

day Saint context. However, Brooks' argument is not unlike those studying deconversion

in evangelical Christian contexts, and thus may not be restricted to LDS culture. For

nearly a decade psychologist Marlene Winell has devoted much of her work to studying

the psychological effects of deconversion from Christian fundamentalist groups, and has

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[170] Merrill and Salazar, "Relationship between Church Attendance and Mental Health among Mormons and Non-Mormons in Utah."
[171] Brooks, "The Disenchanted Self," 195.

been a proponent of officially recognizing *religious trauma syndrome*. Winell argues that

religious trauma syndrome differs from other types of trauma:

> First, the actual teachings and practices of a restrictive religion can be toxic and
> create lifelong mental damage. Second, departing a religious fold adds enormous
> stress as an individual struggles with leaving one world for another. Leaving can
> precipitate significant and sudden loss of social support at the time when such
> support is most needed when one is facing the task of reconstructing one's life.
> Reclaimers are often ill-prepared to deal with this. They have been taught to fear
> the secular world, skills like self-reliance and independent thinking have been
> suppressed or underdeveloped.[172]

The work of Winell and Brooks demonstrates deconversion can be a deeply

traumatic experience but does not look the same in all cultures and religious

communities. Neither Winell nor Brooks are discussing deconversion from a casual

religious institution. Ex-Mormons and the Ex-Christians Winell studies are experiencing

deconversion from what Hinderaker calls a 'totalistic' faith organization—an

organization that comprises value-based relationships, are central to a member's life and

identity, extend into one's everyday life, require complete member loyalty, and involve

primary relationships that bind one's family and friendships to the organization.[173] Losing

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[172] Winell, "The Challenge of Leaving Religion and Becoming Secular."
[173] Hinderaker, "Severing Primary Ties," January 2015; Hinderaker and O'Connor, "The Long Road Out."

belief in this type of faith community is not a casual experience, but a world collapse with the capacity to sever one from the religious mechanisms they once relied on for wellbeing.

The multifactorial theories cited above do not prove causality between R/S and increased wellbeing, but they do identify the mechanisms for wellbeing within religious communities. Religious or not, individuals and communities rely on a variety of social institutions, cultural practices, beliefs, and habits that influence their physical, psychological, cognitive, spiritual, and social wellbeing. Multifactorial theories identify the mechanisms religious persons have relied upon for their wellbeing; understanding them is a helpful first step to understanding the intrapersonal conflict occurring within the Latter-day Saint at the onset of doubt.

As Koenig, et. al note, belief in, relationship with, and attachment to God is the foundation of religious formation, practice, commitment, coping, and experience.[174] At least four of the mechanisms believers relied on for wellbeing become unstable or inaccessible to them when they experience doubt or lose belief. First, religious ritual and commitment may cease to have meaning in a state of non-belief. Second, Pargament theorizes that people cope religiously because it is more compelling than non-religious coping and because religion is relatively available and accessible to them.[175] Because religious coping is predicated on faith, this is unlikely to be true for non-believers. Third, because doubting or criticizing the Church is taboo in the Latter-day Saint community,

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[174] Moreira-Almeida, Neto, and Koenig, "Religiousness and Mental Health," 309.
[175] Pargament, *The Psychology of Religion and Coping*, 162.

non-believers may have limited access to social coping mechanisms. They often feel isolated or severed from close friends, family, and the religious community

> I had no more friends that were not Mormon. And I wasn't going to church anymore, and I didn't know how to talk to them about it, and I didn't really have anyone to talk about it… So, I just felt like there was no outlet for me to talk about my feelings. So, I was just kind of really depressed for most of 2017. (EX1, P1)

Some of these relationships can quickly turn to negative associations as friends and family sever ties, reproach, or out the non-believer to others in attempts to reconvert them or protect the community from doubt. Fourth, as Brooks has noted, losing faith in the Church can result in a world collapse. In this state, the cognitive wellbeing of non-believers may be disrupted as they can no longer make sense of themselves or the world around them. After experiencing world-collapse, the non-believer must reform their identity.

> I would say [leaving the Church is] super hard…like it's kind of stepping away from your entire community, you know, like, I was born and raised in the Church, so my identity was with the Church in a lot of ways, and so It was super hard for me to make that break. I think the hardest thing was just like telling my parents, because they're very in, and that is their identity. And then I left the Church like

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when I had one more semester at BYU Idaho to go and so that was really hard to

feel isolated, while still being very much involved in that community…you

realize you have to create a whole new identity now…and it is a lot of work.

(EX2, P2)

At the onset of doubt begins an intrapersonal conflict, an internal struggle with

disbelief and its consequences. At first glance it may seem a trivial thing to believe or

disbelieve in a set of truth claims. But when a set of beliefs are the totalizing foundation

of one's life, doubt can disrupt every dimension of wellbeing. Hinderaker and O'Connor

found deconversion among Ex-Mormons to be a long back-and-forth process of

disconnecting and reconnecting with their religion. They also found that Ex-Mormons

masked their intent to leave from believers and often experienced deconversion in secret.

Given the possible intensity of deconversion from Mormonism, it should not be

surprising that the exit process is long and non-linear. As mentioned in chapter four,

some non-believers renegotiate their membership by finding new meanings and a new

kind of faith within the institution. While often becoming unorthodox, these believers

remain within the boundaries of acceptable Church membership—they are reconverted.

Those who do not find new meaning and purpose within the Church resolve the internal

deconversion-conflict through institutional exit (i.e., they leave the Church). For these

persons, the conflict is not yet fully resolved but pushed from one social level to another.

the interpersonal dimension of deconversion-conflict becomes prominent as the non-

believer becomes a disbeliever whose deconversion is visible for others to see.

Interpersonal Dimensions of Deconversion-Conflict

Doubt and disbelief do not innately cause conflict or disrupt relationships, but they do contribute to conflict under certain conditions. Undecided persons and Ex-Mormons report that their relationships with other non-believers become stronger and more meaningful after deconversion. But their relationships with believers often suffer. The transition from belief to disbelief is a transformation of relationships between believers and the newly formed disbeliever. This transformation is often destructive and creates fractures between them. But while disbelief is a new component in the relationship, it is not what causes conflict. Rather, it is the combined factors of the disbeliever's deconversion, the believer's strong belief, and the meaningful relationship between them that results in conflict. Without each of these factors, there is no interpersonal dimension of deconversion-conflict.

In the interpersonal dimension of deconversion-conflict there are two characters whose realities must be accounted for in order to understand the phenomenon—the believer and the disbeliever. I will begin with the experiences of believers. When a beloved friend or family member leaves the Church, the believer often experiences fear for their spiritual/physical wellbeing, a sense of loss of the old relationships, and are often unsure what to do. Whatever outsiders may feel about the believer's worldview, their sense of loss is real and must be grieved, worked through, and healed. The Mormon conception of the afterlife includes the idea that families are forever. If a member of the family leaves the Church, they will not be exalted with the rest of the family unit. The

believer's fear for the other is two-part, they fear for the disbeliever's own wellbeing as well as an 'empty seat at the table' in heaven.

> P2: I have an uncle that every time when we have a Facebook page, anytime we got together for family get togethers or anything, [he is] like "remember, we all need to act this way so we can get back to grandpa, grandpa doesn't want an empty seat at the table in heaven. Like, we all need to act this way"…but families are only forever if you follow exactly, you know, if you 'hold to the rod' then family is forever, but if you decide to, you know, if you decide to let go then

> P3: then it's all your fault.

> P2: Yeah! it's not part of that, you're now no longer part of that families are forever and that's spiritual for them, because they're like wait no, no, like we need to all be together. (UD1, P2 & P3)

Because the Church used to retain most of its membership, deconversion is a new experience for most families and friendships. There is no field guide for the believer or the disbeliever to navigate this experience, and both have had to rely on the limited number of strategies and tactics found in their cultural toolkit. The resolution strategies of the believer are often evangelism and apologetics, avoidance, or a renegotiation of the relationship. Evangelism and apologetics make sense within the dominant securitarian

logic of the Church and its members. When seen through this moral system, we can see that because the spiritual and physical wellbeing of the person is predicated on their obedience to the covenant, evangelism is a form of humanitarianism, a selfless and perhaps dutiful act for all those who care. Leaving the covenant is seen as a threat to one's wellbeing, and the disbeliever's traumatic deconversion may further justify this view. Believers may have a proclivity to dismiss the complaints and criticism of the disbeliever because these complaints and criticism are seen as the problem that must be resolved. Believers may even marginalize and coerce the disbeliever in an effort the save them.

During deconversion the non-believer experiences a world collapse, but often hides this experience from believers. Now that we have explored the moral systems of Latter-day Saints and Ex-Mormons, we can understand why non-believers hide their doubt and mask their intent to leave. Non-believers mask their intent to leave because they are afraid of being marginalized or coerced by believers. They know they are within a community where *the means of socialization* (i.e., what makes a group of individuals into a community) are controlled exclusively by believers. And because the means of socialization are based on faith, doubters and critics are at best second-class citizens and at worst a threat to community itself. To doubt is to be marginalized, and to disbelieve is to be outside the community.

Non-believers often described deconversion as a loss of social wellbeing, and many stayed within the Church long after their deconversion for community. Whether the marginalizing effects of Church norms severed the non-believer from the community, or

the community lost meaning after deconversion, their membership did not last in disbelief.

> I guess I stopped being like technically active in 2015 And kind of went back and forth on my involvement. But I didn't really, like feel like I fully have left until just less than a year ago, last summer. And partially because I hadn't really sought out, I don't know, I feel like it's so hard at first. Because you're like, "what's my community now?" and that would keep me going back. Because like I need community, I need people. (EX2, P1)

While Ex-Mormons share common root narrative structures as other outgroups and minorities, the marginalization they experience is qualitatively different from other, more well documented forms of marginalization. Generally speaking, racial and ethnic minorities in the U.S. cannot hide their race or ethnicity from the dominant white group that oppresses them. They may feel safer within their families and communities than they do interacting with those outside them. The opposite is true of Ex-Mormons. The marginalized status of Ex-Mormons is not necessarily visible or audible to others. A coworker or police officer may be unaware of the Ex-Mormon's status within the Latter-day Saint community. In society is where the Ex-Mormon is safest. For example, American society does not expect the Ex-Mormon to obey and believe in the covenant and does not guilt, shame, or coerce them for failing to do so. Ex-Mormons experience marginalization primarily *within* their families and communities. Thus, setting aside

issues of intersectionality, the exodus from the Church may be a dignitarian movement, but the type of marginalization Ex-Mormons experience is distinct from the types articulated by Black Lives Matter and other anti-colonial movements.

For the non-believer, one of the difficulties in resolving deconversion-conflict lies in their marginalized status.[176] While many try, they cannot choose or behave their way to belief. And because they cannot believe, they cannot escape their marginalized status within the faith community. There is a hierarchy of value, and disbelievers are stuck at the bottom. For this reason, a non-believer's resolution strategy eventually includes leaving the Church. But when their family and friends stay in the Church, the conflict is then experienced as an interpersonal conflict between believer and disbeliever. To resolve this conflict, disbelievers often resort to evangelism or apologetics, avoidance, or renegotiating their relationships.

Due to the dignitarian moral system of the disbeliever, they may have a proclivity to dismiss the other's feelings of loss and grief over their deconversion. This may be because the disbeliever sees the other's worldview as false, and therefore illegitimate. But this may also occur because the disbeliever seeks to protect themselves from feelings of guilt or shame. Regardless, the disbeliever should keep in mind that whatever they may think of the other's beliefs, their feelings of pain and loss are real.

All strategies for resolving conflict come from our cultural toolkit, and as an evangelizing community, the Latter-day Saints have received considerable training in

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[176] The dominant narratives of each group not only demonstrate their moral systems, but they also have something to say about their disparate experiences and degree of social power.

missionary work. Most male and many female members have spent time as full-time

missionaries, and until recently most active adult members were assigned to be part-time

home teachers, a calling that includes teaching fellow members once a month. The

Church has also undergone 'every member a missionary' campaigns to maintain the spirit

of evangelism outside official Church callings. It is often from a culture of evangelism

that Latter-day Saints and Ex-Mormons draw their resolution strategies.

When the members engage in evangelism it is often called "*missionary work,*"

and when Ex-Mormons engage in evangelism, it is often called "*anti-Mormonism.*"

Despite these distinctive phrases, both are fundamentally similar modes of discourse.

While each group reaches for this resolution strategy, each group also narrated the

evangelism of the other as a fundamentally disrespectful behavior.

> Being empathetic and being understanding is a two-way street—like we can be as
>
> empathetic and understanding to any group of people that is marginalized within
>
> the Church, but they also have to be understanding that we don't have all the
>
> answers, and we can do the best we can as individual members… And I
>
> personally feel like sometimes that there isn't that respect. (LDS1, P6)

> I think that totally falls right under what you and your friend were doing—just
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> sincerely trying to see their perspective and not trying to defend your religion or
>
> to defend anything. Because I think a lot of times we as Ex-Mormons, I think at
>
> least, we give a lot more respect to Mormons, when we talk about, like, "hey, will

this make you uncomfortable?" and I don't think the respect is given the other way. (EX1, P3)

When viewed through a conflict resolution lens, it is not difficult to see why evangelism is seen as disrespect. What distinguishes conflict resolution from negotiation, dispute resolution, or other modes of interaction between conflict parties is a devotion to two principles: there is more to conflict than 'interests,' and a win-lose outcome in favor of the more powerful party is not conflict resolution. Conflict resolution seeks to find the root causes of conflict as well as innovative win-win solutions. If we consider evangelism and apologetics as modes of interaction, it is clear neither are forms of conflict resolution. Both are founded on sectarian assumptions (i.e., 'we' are right, and 'they' are wrong), and both modes of interaction negatively position the other as something to be changed or defeated. While not all forms of apologetics are the same, in its best form apologetics is a defensive mode of interaction that seeks to protect believers from criticism and doubt. In its worst form, apologetics is an offensive mode of interaction that seeks to undermine the character or beliefs of those outside one's community. Evangelism is an offensive mode of interaction that seeks to replace the other's identity and beliefs with one's own identity and beliefs.

Regardless of the intentions or virtue of the speaker, the point of evangelism is to convert—to produce sameness rather than a respect of difference. For the disbeliever who has suffered through the long and lonely road of deconversion, the evangelism of the believer is often interpreted as utterly disrespectful. And for the believer whose wellbeing

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and framework of reality rests on faith, the evangelism of the disbeliever is often be interpreted as utterly threatening and harmful. Evangelism may be a temporary tactic or a last-ditch effort to bring the disbeliever back into the fold. But it cannot be a permanent state of affairs. As a win-lose mode of interaction, it can neither reconcile a fractured relationship nor preserve an unstable one; instead, it is likely to sustain or generate conflict.

Interpersonal Reconciliation Strategies

To reconcile the believer and the disbeliever, apologetics and evangelism must ultimately be abandoned for modes of interaction that do not seek to change the other. The believer and disbeliever have experienced love in their sameness, but if they are to experience love in their difference, they must renegotiate the relationship, re-learn the other, and reconcile the trauma within them. This requires a degree of vulnerability that may not be automatic or easy. The conflict parties may need to consciously renegotiate their relationship by setting reasonable boundaries. In the Ex-Mormon Focus Group #1, one participant's experience with boundary setting was one of the few positive interactions reported by participants.

> I told all of them I left the Church. but specifically, when I told one of them that I left the Church, she was like, "oh I had no idea." And I think I said, "it's probably obvious, but I like, I'm not active anymore, I don't go to church anymore." She was like, "what? actually no, I hadn't noticed." She was like, "let's get lunch

together sometime and talk about why, and like, what are your boundaries about

me talking about church things?" Because she also, like, she and I have both

[been] going to therapy for a long time, like separately... So, I thought that was

super awesome. We got to sit down, I got to explain to her, you know, like some

of the reasons why I left and like, of course I don't want to get too pushy because I

don't want to be like, you know, I know it's important to her.

After sharing this experience, every other participant in the focus group said they wished

they had similar experiences. Several participants said Ex-Mormons should initiate the

process when their friends and family do not.

Once believers and disbelievers have set *reasonable boundaries*, those that

preclude coercion, marginalization, and evangelism, it will be easier to engage the other

from a position of curiosity where they can be re-learned, and new value can be found.

While the Ex-Mormon may seem the spectacle of curiosity, their world view has

measurably changed. Relearning the Church and the other from the outside is distinct

from being an insider. If reasonable boundaries and genuine curiosity can be achieved in

the relationship, the parties have more or less transcended coercion and marginalization

within their relationship and can again have constructive experiences as family and

friends. Experiencing this quality of friendship after deconversion *is* a form of

reconciliation. While boundaries may need to be renegotiated occasionally, constructive

friendship is the resolution of the interpersonal dimension of deconversion-conflict. And

in cases where either party has not healed from the grief or trauma in the personal

dimension, feelings of safety within a constructive friendship is an important milestone on the long road to healing.

For the wellbeing of the believer, healing will require acknowledging and working through their grief. The disbeliever's deconversion is a real loss to the believer that must be grieved.

> I came out while I was still attending church and it didn't really seem that bad for my family, but then it feels like a second coming out when you're like "okay, but I'm actually going to date men now." And like that whole process, it kind of feels like they grieved like an older version of me that had died; and then they're like "who is this new person that replaced the P1 that we thought we knew?"[177] (EX2, P1)

For the wellbeing of the disbeliever, it will be important to preserve chosen friendships with believers and make new relationships with other disbelievers. For both, healing may require pausing or severing relationships with those who refuse to abandon evangelism, who are unable to respect difference, or who otherwise refuse to respect reasonable boundaries. While relationships after deconversion do not have to be destructive, they often can be. But like Church membership, interpersonal relationships are voluntary.

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[177] It is important to keep in mind that in Mormonism, same-sex dating is a serious violation of the covenant. So, from the point of view of P2's parents, 'dating men' is likely coterminous with leaving the Church.

A state of conflict is not only experienced by people, it is created by people, either knowingly or unknowingly. While power is never distributed equally—and those with more power have greater influence—conflict cannot be created by a single party. Together believers and disbelievers create a state of conflict, and only together can they ultimately create a state of peace. Deconversion-conflict is distinct from other forms of conflict in that it is experienced between persons who often already love and care for each other. As long as both parties are willing and able to experience love in their difference, deconversion-conflict is anything but intractable.

Structural Dimensions of Deconversion-Conflict

Because Ex-Mormons are leaving a voluntary organization and experience deconversion-conflict primarily at the intrapersonal and interpersonal levels, I have hitherto excluded consideration of social structures. But the gravity of doubt would not exist without realities outside the person; Church structures and the fear of social and spiritual consequences play a role in the intensity of deconversion. It is because the Church is a totalizing institution that the deconversion process is intense and potentially traumatic. The deep sense of community, the shared norms and worldviews that bind family and community together under belief are the same factors that make trauma and conflict under disbelief more likely.

While I did not set out to analyze the Church as a social structure, nor consider how it influences deconversion-conflict, participants in nearly every interview articulated

structural observations that are worth considering. In this section I rely on participant

observations from the focus group interviews, theories of social conflict, and my decades

of experience in the community with varying levels of belief. This section should be seen

less as a thorough structural analysis and more like a proposal for future research. No

conflict occurs outside the influence of social structures, and it is important to at least

mention some of the structural influences of deconversion-conflict in the Latter-day Saint

context.

The Church and Durkheim's Anomie

In his seminal work *Le Suicide*, Emile Durkheim theorized that a society with too

little social regulation (i.e., weak behavioral norms) produces feelings of aimlessness and

despair as well as social alienation that leads to higher suicide rates. His observations are

now commonly referred to as *anomie*, or "normlessness." Durkheim observed that

catholic communities with greater focusses on behavioral norms had lower suicide rates

than protestant communities who focused more on belief than behavior. He also observed

that industrializing nations had higher suicide rates than non-industrializing nations and

argued industrial capitalism was a largely anomic force that produced feelings of

alienation and corroded social norms.[178] What Durkheim observed was an inverse

relationship between the strength of social norms and the psychological wellbeing of a

society. Weak social norms increase the choices an individual must make while also

increasing their culpability. Thus, while an increase in choice can be liberating, it can

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[178] Jones, *Emile Durkheim*.

also result in greater anxiety and depression, especially if the individual encounters hardship.[179]

The Church exists in an environment of largely anomic forces but attempts to provide benefits other neo-liberal institutions do not. Before collecting data, I assumed Ex-Mormons would experience considerable degrees of anomie, but Latter-day Saints would not. My assumption seems to be incorrect. Both Latter-day Saints and Ex-Mormons alike describe common sentiments of despair and disconnection; both experience anomie whether they are in or out of the Church, and both narrate their anomie using the Recognition root narrative.

> I was in college and my friend said, "how do you deal with the church's stance on gay marriage?" and I said, "I just don't really think about it." That made me feel really gross. And made me realize that I should think about it, and that's a whole group of people that I'm just not thinking, like just that's wrong. And then… I was invited to baby's baptism, or an eight-year old's baptism, and we had just had a baby and I thought, "I don't know if I'm going to baptize my kid." and that was a big eye-opening thing for me. (UD1, P3)

But while the Church exists within anomic social structures, it has played a role in the anomic experience of its members. President Nelson's root narratives were almost exclusively securitarian, Ex-Mormons were primarily dignitarian and libertarian, but

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[179] Durkheim, Spaulding, and Simpson, *Suicide*; Jones, *Emile Durkheim*.

Latter-day Saints showed a significant mix of all three. In its battle to defend some of its social norms, the Church seems to have created a community in which even many orthodox believers feel like second-class citizens. Latter-day Saints and Ex-Mormons alike narrated Church norms as an alienating force that excluded everyone who did not fit the image of the ideal member.

> I really want to look into this idea that you brought up about trying to be something that you're not. And I think that's what resonated the most with what I've been seeing, and honestly what I've experienced myself in many cases. I wonder if, because on the one hand, the gospel is at its core transformative… we are meant to change fundamentally; we are meant to become something that we're not… Another thing that we're meant to do is help each other with that process of transforming, yes. But exactly how we transform and what we're transforming into, I think is not meant to be primarily a social matter, it's not for us as a people to decide for each other. and I think that a lot of the trouble comes when we tried to do that, when we tried to say, "you shouldn't be dressing like this, you shouldn't be doing X Y Z, if you're doing that you don't fit in our group." I've been on the receiving end of that, and it's probably the most tempted I ever am to just call[ing] it quits and not do[ing] this whole church thing anymore. It's really painful and alienating and almost dehumanizing, it's like they don't want me they want just some mold. Some just cardboard cutout that isn't a real person. Because no person fits all of these, it just can't happen. (LDS2, P5)

I think the LDS Church hates otherness, and so anything other than like a cis-white human is second tier culturally, well okay, well, kind of doctrinally, but culturally I think that holds true. (EX1, P3)

Members of every focus group also expressed solidarities with the LGBTQ+ community, Ex-Mormons, and other marginalized groups. The Church is not immune from changing social norms and environments. The conflict between the Church and its marginalized others has created anomie amongst the members.

The Church may not only play a role in the anomic experience of its members, but it may also be something of an anomic force itself. The Church has changed significantly since its foundation; in its earliest iterations, it was a utopian socialist institution, but is now fundamentally similar to other neo-liberal institutions. And as such, the Church functions similarly to the anomic social arrangements described by Durkheim. The Church competes against other churches for a greater share of the market (i.e., 'membership'), it commodifies its members through goal-oriented retention programs, public relations campaigns, and quantitative measurements of activity, retention, and progress. Even young missionaries and local Bishops are expected to view their callings in primarily quantitative terms. They regularly report on 'progress' seen through the number of baptisms, priesthood ordinations and full-tithe payers. One of its primary goals is growth, and in order the see growth, the Church functions very much like a business in a competitive neo-liberal system. But what it has gained in quantity, it has lost in quality.

The Church's intense focus on covenantal behavioral norms reduces its members to the role they play in the covenant relationship and bases their acceptability primarily on how well they fill that role. The commodification of the members turns 'church' into a performative experience and turns their relationship with God and each other into a kind of transaction.[180]

In the securitarian imagination, the God found in the narratives of President Nelson is a Leviathan whose social contract provides safety from a chaotic and unstable world. But when this same God is viewed through the lens of the egalitarian imagination, we see that Nelson's God is transactional. The sacramental alter is no longer the place where members come to commune with Christ, but a cash register where members exchange their obedience for spiritual blessings. From this imagination we can see that the deep human lessons of Church ordinances, scripture, and theology are lost in a competition between the Church and the masses. In the securitarian imagination, the most important element of an ordinance is that it is authorized; the most important element of the scripture is that it is true; and the most important element of obedience is in the performance of right actions. The deep meaning humans have long found in cooperative religious experience are lost. Relationships become transactional, ordinances become performative, and the community itself lacks cohesion.

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[180] I do not provide sources for the claims in this paragraph because they come from my personal experience as a Zone Leader in the mission field and an Executive Secretary in a Bishopric.

We focus more on the things that don't really matter when it comes down to the church so like we're focusing more on that you're getting tattoos and piercings versus are you being a Christlike human being, and I think that has a lot to play in with [why people leave]. (LDS1, P1)

But I also wanted to touch on the 'trying to save people' thing, because I feel like that happens a lot, and it makes me feel that, and again this might be different because I'm a girl, but I don't feel like I have real relationships in my Ward. They're fake relationships; we talk about the weather and our kids but none of us are really hitting deep conversations because the other person doesn't really care. And if we can somehow move around that and try and actually care about the people around us and let them know that we care about them as human beings, and not just as members, it would make a big difference. (LDS2, P3)

The members may occasionally find common meaning in being against something (i.e., marriage equality), but what they are for is restricted to individualized behaviors. Nelson's God limits moral consideration to the individual. Community only functions to help the individual regulate themselves. But it is in community that humans find a deep sense of meaning. By foregrounding individualized behaviors (i.e., do not drink alcohol or coffee, do not have sex before marriage, pay your tithing, read your scriptures, etc.) the Church has missed out on the communal ethics found in its Abrahamic heritage. If the value of the person is determined by how well they abide these individuated behaviors,

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then the Church has created a value system structurally similar to other anomic social arrangements. They have increased the choices for the individual while increasing their culpability and fostered shallow or even competitive relationships. Said differently, the very structure of the contemporary Church produces alienation.

Furthermore, by focusing on individual behaviors that do not noticeably harm any other person and can only be seen to harm the individual through faith in a particular afterlife, the Church has created an ethic that does not foster community and does not matter at the onset of doubt. The elements of the Church that were once explicitly cooperative depended on an egalitarian ethos such as the law of consecration and the law of the fast. The former has more or less been dismissed entirely in Church practice and the latter has been given a new securitarian meaning. The law of the fast is no longer to uplift the poor but an explicitly transactional practice where the believer exchanges money for spiritual blessings. That the money goes to the poor has become almost irrelevant in the securitarian Church. There were virtually no egalitarian narratives in President Nelson's discourse, r/exmormon, and in all but one focus group interview—Ex-Mormon Focus Group #1. In practice, almost every behavioral norm is narrated as a transactional arrangement where the individual member exchanges their obedience and effort for spiritual blessings. The communal ethic of Jesus is either obscured or optional.

At first glance it may seem that the Church is a haven from neo-liberal society's anomic forces, but competitive individualistic social arrangements are anomic forces with the potential to erode the deep human lessons within Mormonism as well as the experience of community. That the Church has lost touch with its communal ethos is

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demonstrated not only in the near complete lack of egalitarian root narratives found in this study, but in the observations of members, Ex-Mormons, and Undecided persons. The two people in this study who left the Church and later returned expressed a devotion not to the individuated covenant relationship, but to a deep spiritual concern for the other narrated through dignitarian, libertarian, and occasionally egalitarian imaginations. It was the communal ethos of Jesus—Christlike love and virtues—that brought them back to the community, not the transactional God or his promise of spiritual blessings.

> I returned to church, not because people texted me every day, and not because I was force-fed scriptures. I didn't want nor need scriptures, sermons, conference talks, preachers, or to be put on like a temple prayer role. I needed someone to show me that I was accepted and loved more than our common belief in church, and I needed to feel that I was trusted, that I belonged, that I had value, and that I was intelligent and still a spiritually sensitive human being despite being 'unorthodoxical.' I needed an advocate. And so, I needed someone to listen and love me unconditionally. And that's what happened, someone listened and loved me unconditionally. (LDS2, P2)

If the Church wishes to retain its doubting members, they should, at the very least, pivot away from their current individuated ethic, and foster a communal ethic that focusses on the 'Christlike' treatment of others. The Church's transactional ethic does not matter to the members at the onset of doubt, because those behaviors do not obviously harm others,

and can only be seen to harm themselves *if* they believe. This would not only be good for

Church retention, it is the primary wish of Ex-Mormons who have to interact with

believers who believe in Jesus but do not always believe they have to treat outcasts the

way Jesus treated them. If the Church wishes to create a peaceable community (i.e., one

not in a state of anomie and conflict), they should move away from both commodifying

their members and individualizing their ethics.

Relative Depravation

When I asked each focus group why people leave the Church, Latter-day Saints

and Ex-Mormons alike described a discrepancy between the expectations the Church sets

and the reality of their experience. For example, the Church claims it is the one true

church (i.e., that only it has God's approval and the fulness of Christ's teachings), that its

leaders are prophets, seers, and revelators, and that true happiness is found only through

right practice. But some believing members in this study are unhappy in the Church,

disappointed in the membership, and do not find the discourse of the prophets inspiring.

For some there is a gap between the expectations the Church sets and the reality of their

experience.

> The thing that I can find in common with the people that I've talked to who have
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> left—people in my family, friends and so on—is that their expectations just aren't
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> being met for them. There's this ideal that we have in our heads, or discussed
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> culturally, and often even like in scripture there's this ideal of what the Church is

supposed to be, and it very clearly, in many ways, falls short. Sometimes that gap

is massive, like in these sexual abuse cases. But it can even be something as

simple as the famous promise in Moroni 10, that if you read the Book of Mormon,

and ask with a sincere heart, real intent, having faith in Christ, [he will] manifest

the truth of it by the power of the Holy Ghost. In there it seems very cut and dry

and straightforward. You do A, B, and C and you get the promised blessing. when

reality is like, that's still true, but it's not always simple. (LDS2, P5)

The difference between expectations and reality seems to be a common

experience and is not limited to the behaviors of the members. It is also experienced in

the difference between the Church's telling of its history and more nuanced or critical

accounts. The Church tells its history through a primarily romantic genre that excludes

the mistakes of past Church leaders, changes in ritual or belief, and other historical

blemishes that foster doubt. From the logic of the Church's Stability narrative, it makes

sense to speak through the romantic genre. If the goal is obedience to the covenant, and

obedience requires belief, historical facts that cause doubt may be seen as a threat to the

spiritual/physical wellbeing of the members. But when members discover nuanced or

critical accounts, they often feel the Church has lied to them.

I didn't fully read but perused the CES Letter and in one afternoon I was like, I

felt I was given permission to stop believing in a way. Because I was like, "oh,

there are a lot of lies that I was told about a lot of things. And like I don't have to deal with this discomfort If I don't want to anymore." (EX1, P5)

Ted Gurr describes the gap between value expectations and value capabilities as "*relative deprivation*," a kind of tension that can produce conflict. Relative deprivation can occur in three ways: first, when value expectations stay the same, but value capabilities decrease; second, when value expectations rise and value capabilities stay the same; and third, when value expectations and capabilities are rising together for a time, followed by a sharp reversal of capabilities. When humans experience relative deprivation, they become frustrated, especially if they believe they are helpless to make change. The more intense their frustration, the more likely they are to respond with some kind of deviant behavior. In violent conflicts this can be seen through acts of aggression, which are rarely calculated acts of rational self-interest, but "inherently satisfying response[s] to the tension built up through frustration."[181] When a person is experiencing relative deprivation within a non-violent conflict, non-violent expressions of deviancy can also be inherently satisfying.

When we step into the moral system of President Nelson and see the covenant relationship between humankind and God as a social fact, we can see that Nelson's focus on trading obedience for spiritual blessings may be based on a *homoeconomicus* view of human nature (i.e., humans rationally pursue their self-interest). Through the lofty discourse of the Church, the individual's belief in the covenant is fortified and by

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[181] Gurr, *Why Men Rebel*, 23.

consistently reminding them of promised blessings, the members see obedience as a rational choice. They are left to choose for themselves, but they are incentivized to hold up their end of the covenant. But according to Gurr's theory, human beings do not always rationally pursue their self-interest. If their experience in the Church does not meet their value expectations—the expectation that the Church is true, morally exemplary, or important—then they will be more likely to engage in deviant behavior despite procured losses (i.e., the loss of their mechanisms of wellbeing). By far the most common example of relative deprivation in this study was the discrepancy between right action and wellbeing. In Nelson's discourse we see the promise of happiness, but in the discourse of the people we see the presence of marginalization. When the members consistently abide their end of the covenant relationship, they expect their promised rewards. But rather than the promised happiness, many members experience a marginalization they cannot escape through right action.

While more research would have to be done to justify this application of Gurr's theory, three findings have led me to suggest it as a structural element of deconversion-conflict. First, numerous participants observed and reported their experiencing relative depravation. Second, in the Latter-day Saint community, leaving the Church is a form of deviancy. And third, in Reiss's extensive probability research, she found that Ex-Mormons associate their exit from the Church as liberating and positive.[182] These findings suggest the Church may be contributing to deconversion-conflict by setting value expectations they do not currently have the capacity to meet. The gap between

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[182] Riess, *The Next Mormons*, 212.

expectation and experience creates a tension that is ameliorated through acts of deviance. If relative deprivation is intense enough, it may lead members to leave the Church despite procured losses. And after leaving they may then experience conflict with believers who continue to see their behavior as deviant and harmful.

Basic Human Needs and the Faith Based Community

John Burton's theory of basic human needs (BHN) posits that humans have some biological, social, and psychological needs that are basically universal. Burton argues that basic social needs must be satisfied prior to socialization, and if they are not, there will be deviant behavior in one form or another. In Burton's own words, "the individual in society will pursue [their] needs and desires…[they] will use the norms common within society and push against them to the extent necessary to ensure that they work in [their] interests."[183] The theory of basic human needs has not received much attention outside the study of conflict resolution. Although heavily criticized by anthropologists like Kevin Avruch and Peter W. Black,[184] BHN has been, if not an empirically validated theory, a useful one within conflict resolution.[185] Like human rights, basic human needs are not necessarily universal or ontological. But a theory of basic needs is a helpful moral language to consider the grievances of groups and individuals and what these grievances say about social structures. This is perhaps especially the case when the grievances say

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[183] Burton, *Deviance, Terrorism & War*, 78; It should be noted this quote is very similar to the work of Sigmund Freud in his book "The Future of an Illusion"

[184] See Avruch and Black, "A Generic Theory of Conflict Resolution: A Critique."

[185] See Rubenstein, "Basic Human Needs: The Next Steps in Theory Development."

something about the distribution of non-material goods like belonging, identity, and moral consideration. What human rights are to legal systems, basic human needs are to many conflict resolution processes.

One Burtonian explanation of the psychological benefits of religiosity is structural—some institutions meet basic human needs better than others. Within Burton's framework it would be quite natural to agree with Durkheim in saying that modern capitalist societies do a poor job at satisfying certain basic needs. For example, a needs analysis would likely note that neo-liberal societies do a poor job at providing a sense of meaning outside of the acquisition of wealth and struggle to meet needs for distributive justice, recognition, and identity. By tying groups together through shared beliefs and behavioral norms, religious institutions are able to give their members a sense of meaning, as well as meet the needs of recognition and identity. This is a potential explanation for why crime and delinquency are negatively correlated with religiosity. When basic needs are met, individuals have little interest in pushing against social norms just as Burton describes. Describing the R/S-wellbeing correlation in Burtonian terms, we could say that religious/spiritual persons have more of their basic needs met than non-religious/spiritual persons. [186]

However, from the data analyzed in this thesis, it seems that religious institutions can only meet these needs on the premise of belief. If a person no longer believes, the

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[186] It should be noted that Galtung had more to say about 'meaning' as a basic need than Burton, and that neither thoroughly considered the needs satisfied by religion. In this section I am attempting to bring basic human needs theory into the discussion of religious institutions. Furthermore, I assume religious people have more of their basic needs met because they report experiencing greater wellbeing.

institution loses its ability to meet the needs of meaning and identity. In accordance with Burton's theory, the individual is then likely to push back against social norms in order to meet their basic needs. In a Latter-day Saint context this could take shape in a number of ways. The individual many no longer be willing to abstain from pre-marital sex or same-sex relationships. The non-believer may reconsider the Latter-day Saint dietary code and begin drinking coffee and alcohol. They may begin to form an identity outside the Church. They may study religious and philosophical ideas considered heretical to Mormon thought. And, perhaps for their own wellbeing, the individual may seek association with non-Mormon persons. If the religious institution is meeting the basic human needs of the individual, there are lower incentives to push against these behavioral norms which are often treated as moral facts within the institution. But, if the individual does not have their basic needs met, which is especially the case once they no longer believe, they have an increased incentive to push back against norms and reform an identity distinct and separate from the Church.

Unfortunately for many doubting Latter-day Saints and Ex-Mormons, they live within a community and institutional structure that is incentivized to oppose this transition. While this can be expressed in minimal forms such as parents noting care and worry for the non-believer, it can also take maximalist forms. Care can be expressed through guilt and shame that slows institutional exit unnecessarily and causes psychological harm. Care can even be the impetus for maltreatment and abuse of individuals if their friends and family sacrifice their wellbeing on the altar of salvation. The conflicting interests between exiting non-believers and their believing family

members risks prolonging their deconversion and causing trauma. Thus, while religious

institutions may be able to meet some of the basic needs of their members better than

other institutions, the opposite may be true of disbelievers. By creating incentives to slow

or prevent exit as well as silence criticism, the Church actively blocks its non- and

disbelieving members from finding identity and belonging outside the Church and from

having their grievances recognized.

Conclusion

In this thesis I have analyzed the root narratives of the Church, its members, and

its former members. President Nelson speaks primarily in the securitarian Stability mode

that casts the villain as the ignorant masses, the abuse of power as biased folkways,

spiritual/physical deprivation as the harm caused, and the hero as the Church. Nelson

narrates salvation as a Hobbesian social contract—the Church plays the role of the

leviathan that brings moral order and spiritual/physical safety. Disobedience to the social

contract brings spiritual/physical harm while obedience brings peace and spiritual

blessings. R/exomormon, the largest community of Ex-Mormons speaks primarily

through the dignitarian Recognition and Liberation modes that cast the villain as either

the ignorant masses or the Church, the abuse of power as either biased folkways or

political coercion, the harm as cultural disrespect, and the hero as the undaunted

outgroup. Ex-Mormons synthesize the Recognition and Liberation modes wherein the

Church is narrated as a marginalizing power who creates damaged identities outgroups

cannot escape. Ex-Mormons, the LGBTQ+ communities, women, racial and ethnic

minorities are narrated as victims of the dominant group whose marginalizing norms can only be overcome through liberation from the Church (i.e., the social contract) or through recognizing and changing its norms.

What the Church sees as its primary method of overcoming abusive power (i.e., right behavioral norms) Ex-Mormon's see as an abuse of cultural power (i.e., marginalizing norms and policies). And what Ex-Mormon's see as their primary method of overcoming abusive power (i.e., deconstructive a hierarchy of human value) is seen by the Church as an abuse of agentic power that creates physical/spiritual deprivation. These findings suggest two things: a) deconversion includes a narrative transformation wherein the entire moral system of the non-believer may change and b) the Church and Ex-Mormons are in a state of social conflict.

Because the Church is a voluntary organization Ex-Mormons have left, it may not be practical or ethical to attempt conflict resolution between them. However, the Church is also a totalizing organization that is the basis of its members' identity, friend and familial relationships, behaviors, beliefs, and everyday experience. Disbelievers leave the institution but often remain tied to family and friends. Therefore, the most important place for conflict resolution in deconversion-conflict may be within interpersonal relationships.

Through conducting and analyzing five focus group interviews of Latter-day Saints, Undecided Persons, and Ex-Mormons, this thesis made five findings. First, while the root narratives of the people are more diverse than those expressed in their ritualistic gathering places, the securitarian imagination dominant in the Church's narratives are

also dominant in its membership, and the dominant root narratives of r/exmormon are also dominant amongst Ex-Mormons and Undecided persons. Second, while Nelson does not speak through the dignitarian imagination, the members speak through it often. Perhaps the leaders do not experience the Church the same way members do. Participants in every focus group spoke of the Church's norms as a marginalizing force. Third, in the discourse of Latter-day Saints the distinction between securitarian and dignitarian or libertarian discourse was the covenant behaviors on the one hand and Christlike behaviors on the other. The Church's social contract seems to privilege individuated behaviors that can only be seen to harm others if one believes in spiritual harm. Members narrate their concern with others primarily through dignitarian or libertarian modes. This may be one reason participants in several focus groups claim the Church focusses on things that are not important.

Fourth, while some Undecided members believed in the Church's truth claims more than others, believing participants expressed a tension between their belief in the Church's truth claims and their frustration with its marginalizing policies and behaviors. Fifth, r/exmormon and the focus groups both showed significant dignitarian discourse, but the focus groups were more inclusive in who was considered a marginalized outgroup. It is not only the LGBTQ+ and Ex-Mormons who are marginalized, it is everyone who does not fit the personal history, physical appearance, spiritual beliefs, and political views present in the image of the ideal member. Normality is sought after, and those who do not 'fit the type' feel guilted, shamed, or othered.

Finally, in this thesis I have argued that deconversion is a type of social conflict and considered its intrapersonal, interpersonal, and structural dimensions. In its intrapersonal dimension the individual loses access to the mechanisms they once relied upon for their wellbeing and may experience significant trauma. In the interpersonal dimension, deconversion transforms a non-believer's relationships with believing friends and family. When their beloved friend or family leaves the Church, the member experiences a real loss and may seek to resolve the issue through apologetics or evangelism. When either believers or non-believers engage in evangelism, the relationship is harmed. To preserve chosen relationships, believers and non-believers should suspend evangelism, renegotiate their relationship through a process of boundary setting, and grieve the loss that comes with deconversion.

In the structural dimension of deconversion conflict I have hypothesized that a) the conflict between the Church and its outgroups produces a sense of anomie among the members. b) The impetus for growth has influenced the Church to commodify its members and preach a transactional God; it has created a competitive individualistic social arrangement—what Durkheim identifies as an anomic force—with the potential to erode the deep human lessons in religious doctrine and the experience of community. c) The gap between member's value expectations and the Church's value capabilities produces conflict by creating frustration; in a state of frustration, deviant behavior can become inherently satisfying. d) Patriarchal, heteronormative, and ethnic norms that privilege some over others create a second-class citizenry and damaged identities outgroups cannot escape while remaining in the Church. Defending these norms is to

defend the cultural roots of conflict. e) Religious institutions seem to do a better job at meeting the basic human needs of their members than most institutions within neo-liberal societies; however, religious institutions have a weakness that other institutions do not—their ability to meet the identity and belonging needs of their members is based on belief. The Church seems unable to meet the needs of non- and disbelieving members. By incentivizing members to evangelize disbelieving members and former members, the Church actively blocks disbelievers from creating a tolerable life outside the Church and thereby plays a role in the intensity of deconversion-conflict.

The next step in this research is to bring Latter-day Saints and Ex-Mormons together to test the practice of suspending evangelism and boundary setting. While the participants in this study found these practices helpful, these are merely anecdotal, and may not be generally applicable. Future research should test these strategies and others to see what helps believers and disbelievers reconcile and recreate constructive and healthy relationships. There is a current exodus out of religious institutions in the United States, and there is no indication this is slowing down.[187] This should be understood as a societal transition; and conflict is innate to any societal transition. This thesis has attempted to demonstrate that deconversion is a type of social conflict. But if the conflict is to be mitigated, peacebuilders will have to practice, fail, and innovate. Transitional justice is not automatic, it requires conscious effort and intervention. Future research should include practice.

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[187] Pew Research Center, "In U.S., Decline of Christianity Continues at Rapid Pace."

While conflicts rarely resolve themselves without some kind of intervention, deconversion-conflict is anything but intractable; resolution is within reach. The internal conflict is resolved as soon as one renegotiates their identity, be it within or without the Church. And the believers and disbelievers who wish to preserve their relationships could not be in a better position to do so. Having experienced 'relationship' before deconversion, they often care deeply for one other. Within the win-lose mode of evangelism, care is weaponized and expressed in a destructive manner. But if believers and disbelievers suspend evangelism, set reasonable boundaries, and work to grieve the loss of love in their sameness, they can begin to experience love in their difference.

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