

WHY I'M SO BAD AT NOT USING "MORMON"

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It's been almost six months since we were asked to ditch the term "Mormon." I've been reflecting on it lately, I think because I'm anticipating some sort of follow-up at General Conference and I am keenly aware of how badly I've done at it.

With each reminder that "Mormon" is out, I've felt what I can only describe as a sense of mourning. It's a strange reaction, given that I am fully on board with efforts to represent ours as a global, Christ-centered church.

But as I've gone about trying to scrub the word "Mormon" from my vocabulary, I've realized how deeply it is intertwined with my identity as a Latter-day Saint. I've attempted to simply swap out the old lingo for the new, but the correct name of the church is not a synonym for all that "Mormon" means.

It's led me to wonder whether we are being asked to give up not just the word Mormon, but the cultural identity it represents. I find myself simultaneously ecstatic and sorrowful at this prospect. I am flummoxed, and here's why—

Weirdly, a couple months before the "Mormon" ban, I launched a project with a friend on Instagram called @MormonsInMedia. Our goal was just as the name suggests: find every mention of Mormons, or Mormonism, in mainstream media, and see what it could tell us about how we're represented.

What it's told us is so far is that we show up everywhere, characterized by our cultural peculiarities.

In *Friends*, a pregnant Rachel makes a joke about pretending she's Mormon as an excuse for why she can't drink on a date. In *That '70s Show*, Red complains about a group of kids following him around, saying he feels like a Mormon. By far the most frequent jokes have to do with polygamy, which we've seen so far in *New Girl*, *Two Weeks Notice*, *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend*, and the Broadway musical *Chicago*, to name just a few.

It's been fascinating to explore the ways Mormons are depicted in mainstream media. But after President Nelson's announcement, we experienced an awkward moment of, do we rebrand this thing? If we keep the name (and the catchy alliteration) are we disobeying the Prophet?

We decided to stick with it, if for no other reason than that @MembersOfTheChurchOfJesusChristOfLatterDaySaintsInMedia was too long for a handle. A couple more months into the project, though, we've realized that name would not even be accurate, because these references are not depicting followers of Christ. They're depicting Mormons.

They are depicting the identity we embraced and promoted for so long, the identity I think we are now being asked to disappear?

It's the Jello stuff, you know? The stuff that is not Jesus but so Mormon. The stuff that stems from doctrine but is far enough in practice to obscure it almost completely.

On one hand, these examples have made clear to me why moving away from the term might be important—because it's made it too easy for us to be defined by cultural oddities rather than religious belief.

On the other, it's shown me that those representing us in books or on the big screen are not interested in accuracy or nuanced depiction, even now. I am highly skeptical that any Hollywood writer will come around to this name change, when they don't seem to be capable of Googling whether polygamy still exists in our church. (Here it feels necessary to mention that almost the only instance we've seen where someone uses the correct name is Eminem, in two different songs from 2017 and 2001. Thank you, Marshall!)

Now, do I think President Nelson cares much how we are represented in Hollywood? Probably not. But as a writer in the era of ‘representation matters,’ I care deeply about it. I want us represented, and I want us represented accurately, or at least by our Own Voices.

The question then becomes, is it possible? And if the likelihood of real, nuanced Latter-day Saint characters showing up in mainstream media is low, is it better to eradicate “Mormon” and the caricatures it tends to produce altogether?

Another facet of *Mormons In Media* has been highlighting noteworthy Mormons. Take, for example, Bryce Harper’s recent record-breaking contract with the Phillies, or Ryan Gosling’s classic performance at the Mormon talent show.

I feel perfectly fine claiming these famous strangers as Mormons. But I feel like a presumptuous jerk calling them Members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. I simply have no idea what their current relationship to Christ looks like, and who am I to out them for a religion they may or may not believe in?

I’ve heard people say Mormon is the new Jewish, in the sense that it’s possible to claim it as a cultural identity while not practicing its religion. I suspect some part of this name not-change is in effort to slow a trend toward cultural Mormonism. Half of me feels thrilled and relieved at this, given there are enough damaging or simply extraneous parts of Mormon culture that get in the way of true religion. The other half of me feels my Mormon heritage so deeply I wonder, is it even possible to do away with?

Because a Mormon identity is not one you can simply shrug off. It’s not a culture many of us choose—we’re born into it, surrounded by it; a disproportionate number of us are blood descendants of its founding fathers (I told you it always comes back to polygamy).

Mormon culture is so strong, it will define you whether you believe in its God or not. Can we do away with it by taking away its name? Do we need to in order to be ‘one in Christ?’

I am flummoxed at how to implement this change because it feels like a game of chicken and egg: we have to stop talking about the culture so the culture can go away. But the culture is so behemoth and has been wholly formative of my (and I suspect others') lives, how can we not talk about it?

I'm aware that I am likely being a giant baby and maybe even ethnocentric for mourning the loss of my specific Mormon culture. I sincerely don't want to promote the tendency to view Mormonism through a strictly American lens. But the lines seem to blur between Mormon heritage, Mormon culture, and Latter-day Saint belief. It's splitting hairs, but feels necessary given I am a writer interested in exploring these identities.

When I use the word "Mormon," I am talking about a sober, smiling, industrious people who build strong communities, export missionaries, and drive minivans. I am talking about Funeral Potatoes and Pinewood Derbies—warm fuzzy not-Jesus things that shape a Mormon identity.

When I use the word "Mormon," I am also talking about an absurd dating culture, narrow gender roles, and sometimes hurtful treatment of those who don't fit the mold. I am talking about insular communities, homogeneity, and a perplexing tendency toward MLMs.

Is this a culture worth defending? I'm not sure. But it is a culture worth exploring, and without being able to use the word "Mormon," I don't know how.