

## The **WARD** Analyst

# THE SPIRAL OF SILENCE IN A CHURCH SETTING

For this [theory](#) to be plausible it relies on the idea that in a given situation we all possess a sort of intuitive way of knowing what the prevailing opinion happens to be. The spiral is created or reinforced when someone in the perceived opinion majority speaks out confidently in support of the majority opinion, hence the minority begins to be more and more distanced from a place where they are comfortable to voice their opinion and begin to experience the aforementioned fears.

### Spiral of Silence

*“people’s willingness to express their opinions on controversial public issues is affected by their largely unconscious perception of those opinions as being either popular or unpopular.”* [Encyclopedia Britannica](#)

This sociological phenomenon happens when the human base motivations for safety overrides the urge of authenticity. Humans are social creatures and the drive to survive induces behaviors that help us “fit-in” to the surrounding environment. The idea was coined by Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann, a Communications researcher in the 1960s and 1970s.

Consider a university setting where a pro-life student sits among a class filled with pro-choice students who are openly sharing their reasons for their beliefs. The amygdala is the part of the brain that regulates hormone levels, the hippocampus stores memories, and the frontal-cortex is where strategic reasoning takes place. Sitting in the classroom, the pro-life students’ amygdala is releasing cortisol and adrenaline, listening to the hippocampus tell it stories of examples of when people disagreed with a group and became ostracized. The urge to stay silent is overwhelming and the student says nothing. The frontal-cortex tells itself a justification of why it is appropriate to not say anything and stay silent at that time.

In this setting, the freedom of speech exists as a policy but social pressure prevents people from freely expressing their views. Stay low, stay hidden, stay accepted or at least neutral. In Latter-day Saint culture, the language of “I know” and “I have a strong testimony of” are used frequently; members who have neither of those things feel out of place.



### Creating the Climate

Rhetoric by the top leadership of the Church has been successful at positioning doubt as not a natural and healthy stage of maturity in one’s spiritual progression, but as a negative [influence](#) in one’s life. This has given the population license to treat people who have doubts as someone who is spiritually sick, contaminated, or as a disease to keep away from their children. This rhetoric was intense in the latter half of the 20th century, but has decreased in prevalence since the advent of the internet. The rhetoric continues however, maintaining that one is spiritually healthy if they are at a state of peace. Uncertainty is a sign of sickness, not an indicator of one ready for further growth. In Elder and Sister Renlund’s Jan 2019 worldwide [devotional](#), they portray people with a personality that has a predisposition for questioning as ungrateful, short sighted, and as “perpetual doubter(s)”.

As a result anyone who does bring themselves to

express doubt in the form of a question in a public Church setting usually follows it with a caveat, declaring their unwavering dedication as a signal flag to the group of: "But don't isolate me, I'm still one of you, please continue to accept me." Organizational psychology principles apply whether to ecclesiastical organizations and businesses. The owner sets the tone, and the officers ensure the tone is carried out.

Comments: It has been a long time since our faith's leaders have attempted to engage with the intellectual and questioners directly, perhaps it is time they do once again. Statements like these could go a long way to create an environment where people can engage in dialogue without fear of being labeled as unfaithful.

*"The people of "simple faith," who never question, are so much easier led, and so much more pleasant every way—they give their teachers so little trouble. People who question because they want to know, and who ask adult questions that call for adult answers, disturb the ease of the priests. The people who question are usually the people who think—barring chronic questioners and cranks, of course—and thinkers are troublesome, unless the instructors who lead them are thinkers also. Therefore one must not be surprised if now and again he finds those among religious teachers who give encouragement to mental laziness under the pretense of "reverence;" praise "simple faith" because they themselves would avoid the stress of thought and investigation that would be necessary in order to hold their place as leaders of a thinking people. Some would protest against investigation lest it threaten the integrity of accepted formulas of truth—which too often they confound with the truth itself, regarding the scaffolding and the building as one and the same thing."*

*Elder B.H. Roberts, 1912*