

Are Mormons Christian? It's complicated

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(RNS) Ask Mormons if they are Christian, and their answer often starts with a sigh.

Look at our name, they'll say, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Read The Book of Mormon's subtitle, "Another Testament of Jesus Christ." Examine our Articles of Faith, "We believe that through the Atonement of Christ, all mankind may be saved..."

"When we read in the press that some religious person who should know better refers to us as non-Christian, it is baffling to us," said Michael Otterson, the church's head of public affairs. "To suggest that we don't embrace Christ and his sacrifice for all of us is insulting."

Yet nearly a quarter of Americans remain unconvinced, according to a recent poll conducted by The Salt Lake Tribune. The Vatican and several Protestant churches do not accept Mormon baptisms as legitimate (neither do Mormons recognize theirs), and some conservative evangelicals call Mormonism a "cult." Mormons, meanwhile, believe they belong to the one true Christian church.

The theological debate might have remained relegated to Sunday school discussions and interfaith summits were it not for the presidential candidacy of Mitt Romney, a devout Mormon and onetime LDS bishop. While the former Massachusetts governor and current GOP frontrunner has muted religious talk during this campaign, he indirectly addressed the Mormon-Christian issue during his previous White House bid.

"There is one fundamental question about which I often am asked," he said in a 2007 speech in Texas. "What do I believe about Jesus Christ? I believe that Jesus Christ is the son of God and the savior of mankind."

Stressing the similarities between Mormonism and mainstream Christianity makes political sense. Republicans who say Mormons are not Christian are less likely to view Romney favorably or support his campaign, according to a November survey by the nonpartisan Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life.

During the 2007 speech, Romney acknowledged that "my church's beliefs about Christ may not all be the same as those of other faiths." But explaining theological arcana is not a politician's job, he argued. It amounts to a religious test for office, which the Constitution forbids.

Still, the debate lingers around Romney's campaign: Are he and fellow Mormons Christians? The question seems simple enough, but the answer is quite complicated.

Who's in and Who's Out?

According to "The Atlas of Global Christianity," there are 41,000 Christian denominations. No definition of Christianity could encompass their doctrinal diversity, said Martin Marty, an emeritus professor at the University of Chicago Divinity School. "I wish there was some official place where you could determine who's in and who's out, but there's not. No one can speak for all of Christianity in all its nuances."

The atlas lists Mormonism as a "marginal" Christian group, along with Jehovah's Witnesses and the Rev. Sun Myung Moon's Unification Church, primarily because it deviates from traditional Christian teachings on Jesus and claims sources of revelation beyond the Bible.

The "marginal" category is not a perfect fit and rings a pejorative tone, said Todd Johnson, editor of the atlas and director of the Center for the Study of Global Christianity at Gordon-Conwell Seminary. "It's not a category that helps you understand what these groups believe. It's just saying that they have something besides the Bible that is quite significant."

For centuries, most Christians have relied a closed canon of scriptures and creeds to draw the circle of membership. Catholics, Anglicans, Eastern Orthodox Christians and many Protestant churches recite the 4th Century Nicene Creed, for example, which states foundational Christian tenets.

Mormonism's founding prophet, Joseph Smith, blasted the Christian canon wide open and cast aside the creeds. At a time when religious revivals engulfed his Upstate New York homestead, a 14-year-old Smith reported a vision of God and Jesus, who told him that the Christian churches had fallen into apostasy.

A second vision directed Smith to a stack of buried golden plates, according to LDS Church history. The plates, which became The Book of Mormon, told of an ancient society visited by Jesus in North America that was destroyed by warring tribes.

With the impatience of a prophet, Smith set out to restore the Christian church. He revised the Bible; reported receiving "keys to the priesthood" from John the Baptist; rejected the traditional idea of the Trinity as three-gods-in-one; taught that God was once a flesh-and-blood man, and that men could become gods through purification and obedience to the church.

They were all -- including Smith's promotion as Prophet of the Restoration -- radical departures from centuries of Christian orthodoxy. And intentionally so.

Smith's Latter-day Saints consider The Book of Mormon as much a part of God's word as the Bible, and continue to honor their top leader as "prophet, seer and revelator."

"Take away the Book of Mormon and the revelations," Smith said, "and where is our religion? We have none."

The Fourth Abrahamic Faith?

Jan Shipps, the preeminent non-Mormon expert on the LDS church, draws a comparison between the early Christians and Latter-day Saints. Both introduced new scriptures and ideas to established religions, and insisted that their new faith fulfilled the old. Christians added the New Testament to Judaism, and Smith added The Book of Mormon to Christianity.

Richard Land, an ethicist with the Southern Baptist Convention, goes even further, calling Mormonism "the fourth Abrahamic faith," after Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Like Islam, Land said, Mormons receive the Old and New Testament as sacred texts, but not as the final divine word. Like Islam's Prophet Muhammad, Smith is considered an authoritative vessel of God's word.

"Whatever it is, Mormonism is not Christianity," Land said. "They do not believe in the doctrine of the Trinity, they do not believe in God the Father as he is recognized in the orthodox Christian faith, and they believe that 'As man now is, God was once.' The only thing right about that sentence from the orthodox Christian perspective is the punctuation."

Evangelicals like Land tend to be the most eager to keep Mormons from the Christian camp. In addition to doctrinal concerns, Johnson said, conservative Christians worry about sheep-stealing Mormon missionaries. "It's a pragmatic decision to call (Mormons) non-Christian, to protect church members from Mormon evangelism," he said.

But even Catholics and more liberal Protestants, such as the Presbyterian Church (USA), the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and the United Methodist Church, do not consider Mormon baptisms valid.

"The church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, by self-definition, does not fit within the bounds of the historic, apostolic tradition of Christian faith," the Methodists wrote in 2000.

Cherishing Mormon Distinctiveness

Mormons do not deny their differences with traditional Christianity. According to a recent survey, Mormons are as likely to say their religion resembles Judaism as it does evangelical Protestantism.

Otterson says Mormons cherish their distinctiveness, much as Catholics or Methodists show special devotion to their traditions. But Mormon leaders have also sought to tie their unique theology to the earliest Christians, using the ancient past to sanction the present.

For example, arguing that Mormons are not Christians because they do not recite the Nicene Creed would leave Jesus and his disciples outside the Christian fold as well, argues Elder Jeffrey R. Holland, a member of the LDS Church's Quorum of Twelve Apostles. And, Holland says, the idea of a flesh-and-blood God should not sound strange to Christians, who, after all, believe in the bodily birth and resurrection of Jesus.

Christians who insist on a single, closed canon forget that Catholics and Protestants use different versions of the Bible, argues Stephen Robinson, a professor of religion at Mormon-run Brigham Young University in Utah. And didn't differing interpretations of the Trinity contribute to the Great Schism between the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches in 1054?

Mormon theologian Robert Millet has been laboring to convince Christians that the Mormon idea of deification -- humans becoming gods -- resembles the mystical union with the divine taught by early church fathers like St. Augustine. But Millet said he worries more about the opinions of Christians in the pews than the specialized scholars who read his books.

"When people call Mormons non-Christian, they might believe that we do not accept Jesus Christ as Lord and savior, or believe in the New Testament," Millet said. "We don't want to fight about this. We just wish people would get it right."