

Mormonism

(part 1 of 2): Who are the Mormons?

Mormonism - the doctrines and practices of the Mormon Church based on the Book of Mormon.[1]



Mormons are members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. The name Latter-day comes from the belief that after the death of the early apostles, the Christian church fell into apostasy and needed to be restored in the “latter days”. [2]

The Church of Latter-day Saints (LDS) was established in 1830 and since that time it has grown from a small congregation to a worldwide religion of over 14 million adherents. Although the centre of the church is in the American state of Utah, only 14% of Mormons live there. The Church has nearly 30,000 congregations in more than 130 temples across the globe. It prints monthly magazines in 50 languages, and has published more than 100 million copies of the Book of Mormon in over 93 languages. Currently (2012), LDS has more than 50,000 missionaries in 162 countries. [3]

At the most basic level Mormonism shares most Judeo-Christian beliefs; the creation of the world, the stories of Adam and Eve, the flood and the prophets. However they do take a slightly different approach to some of these stories. For example, Mormon’s believe that the archangel Michael was born on earth as Adam, the first mortal man. In the Mormon version of the creation story, Jesus Christ, who before his birth was the Jehovah of the Hebrew Bible, created the earth and all things on it at the direction of God the Father. This is a notion very similar to the beliefs of the Jehovah’s Witnesses. [4]

The Mormon understanding of God is quite distinct from what most Christian denominations believe and it goes without saying that it is very different from both Judaism and Islam. Mormons believe that God is immortal and that He was once a man albeit a perfect and exalted man. God is not of another species, nor is he the great unknowable one; he is indeed our Father in heaven. God according to the Church of Latter-day Saints is literally the father of every human being. He has a body, and emotions like all human beings. To Muslims and Christians alike this sounds blasphemous and contributes to the reasons why most Christian denominations do not consider Mormons to be Christians. In fact in both the Catholic and Methodist denominations Mormons who convert are required to be baptised into the Christian faith, which is not usually the case when Christians leave one Christian denomination for another.

A Mormon belief that strikes at the very heart of anyone practising one of the Abrahamic faiths (Judaism, Christianity and Islam) is the insistence that Jesus is the Son of God in the most literal sense. He is the eldest brother of all mortals and the firstborn spirit child of God. They believe that from Mary, a mortal woman, Jesus inherited the capacity to die, and from God, an exalted being, he inherited the capacity to live forever.[5]

Consequently and based on what most Christians believe, the Mormon version of the Trinity is somewhat unusual. According to Mormons, the Trinity is a Godhead that consists of three separate, distinct beings, God the Father, also called Elohim, Jesus Christ, who is also the Jehovah of the Old Testament and the Holy Ghost. Mormons also believe that there is more than one God and that human beings have the potential to become gods.

Like a pendulum Mormon beliefs swing between what is accepted by mainstream Christian churches and their own peculiar mix of Christianity and visionary stories. According to research scientist and former Mormon Bishop, Simon G. Southerton[6], The Book of Mormon is based on the concept that Meso-America was an uninhabited land peopled by Jews who floated across the ocean in a boat that resembled two large dishes fastened together to form a hollow. Needless to say there is no historical or archaeological evidence to support this theory.

Nonetheless Mormons believe that the resurrected Jesus ministered to these people, called the Nephites. He appeared before a congregation in their temple, and allowed them to feel the wounds in his hands and feet. He stayed with them for several days, teaching and healing and ordained twelve disciples. He gave the people various commandments and presented them with the gift of the Holy Ghost.

Mormons earnestly believe that Jesus Christ began his restoration of his church on earth through the Prophet Joseph Smith in 1820. Joseph began having visions of restoring the church at age 14, and claimed to have the same teachings and basic organization as the Church established by Jesus in New Testament times. According to an LDS official website[7], “In 1823 Joseph Smith was visited by a heavenly messenger named Moroni just as angels often appeared to Apostles in the New Testament. Moroni told Joseph about a record of the ancient inhabitants of the American continent (the Nephites) that was buried in a nearby hill and was written on thin metal sheets of gold.” Joseph found the plates near his home in Palmyra, New York. With heavenly inspiration, because Joseph did not understand the “reformed Egyptian” language written on the plates, he translated the book into English. The book was named the Book of Mormon after the ancient prophet who compiled it.

Along with the Book of Mormon, Mormons believe the Bible is sacred and like Muslims they believe that the words of God found in the Bible are a mixture of truth and error because many have been changed, or forgotten. However the Mormon version is in no way acceptable to Islam. The Mormon sacred scripture also includes a book called The Pearl of Great Price, which

includes two lost books of the Bible, a translation of the Gospel of Matthew, and the 13 Articles of Faith; and The Doctrine and Covenants, a group of 138 revelations from God and two other official documents.

In the next article we will continue to explore the differences between Mormonism, mainstream Christianity and Islam.

Footnotes:

[1] (wordnetweb.princeton.edu/perl/webwn)

[2] (<http://www.beliefnet.com/Faiths/Christianity/Latter-Day-Saints>)

[3] (<http://mormon.org/faq/the-mormons>)

[4] (<http://www.patheos.com/Library/Mormonism/>)

[5] (<http://www.beliefnet.com/Faiths/Christianity/Latter-Day-Saints/>)

[6] <http://www.ctlibrary.com/ct/2004/october/8.20.html>

[7] Ibid

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The Church of Latter-day Saints, better known as the Mormon Church has a list of basic doctrines known as the 13 articles of Faith. Written by Joseph Smith in 1842 the articles cover the essential elements of what Mormons believe. At first glimpse they appear innocuous and typical of any Christian church. However they do leave out some important beliefs that make the Mormon Church unique and explain the reason why many mainstream Christians believe that Mormonism is not a Christian denomination. For instance they do not describe the concept of eternal families or baptism of the dead. Nor do they mention some of the rather odd practices and beliefs such as wearing special protective underwear and unusual secret ceremonies.

In the previous article we examined the extraordinary claim that both God and Jesus were once mortal men who played distinct roles in the creation of earth and the creation of humankind. They are the first two parts of a trinity that includes the Holy Ghost (spirit). Muslims find the notion that God was once a human being as offensive. The fundamental doctrine of Islam is that God is One, unique, incomparable and is unlike His creation. Likewise most Christians also find the concept of God as a mortal human being astonishing, even though they have no trouble accepting Jesus as being both mortal and divine at the same time.

Mormons and Muslims both share the belief that the doctrine of original sin does not exist, thus both believe that people are not punished for the sins or mistakes made by Adam and Eve, and their children are not accountable to God

for their actions until they have reached the age of accountability. In Mormonism this is around the age of 8 years and in Islam it is at the age of puberty. This is where the similarities end. Punishment in Mormonism is not being able to dwell with God in the third heaven; it does not involve Hell because Mormons do not believe that hell exists, whereas the existence of hell is one of the pillars of belief in Islam. Christian denominations usually have some concept of Hell or a place of eternal punishment.

Mormons believe in Baptism by immersion in water and the laying on of hands, by which a person receives the Holy Spirit. These rites are essential and without them a person will not be “saved”. Mormon children are baptised at age 8. In Christianity, baptism is performed usually on babies primarily to remove the stain of original sin. Some Christian denominations use full immersion in water while others use the water symbolically. Islam has no such rite believing instead that all people are born Muslim, i.e. born already knowing and submitting to God. At age 12, Mormon children are able to go to the temple and do baptisms for the dead, a process unique to the Mormon Church. Mormon’s after extensive genealogy research go to the temples with lists of the dead to be baptised on their behalf.

Article 9 of the Mormon faith states, “We believe all that God has revealed, all that He does now reveal, and we believe that He will yet reveal many great and important things pertaining to the Kingdom of God.” This basically means that God is continuing his revelations through the continuous line of Mormon prophets. All supreme leaders of The Church of Latter-day Saints are prophets, beginning with Joseph Smith, his successor Brigham Young and so on down through the generations. The last time a Mormon prophet publicized revelation from God was in 1978 when black people were granted the ability to hold office in the Mormon Church. In most Christian denominations the line of Prophets from God stops at Jesus Christ, although there have been a number of people claiming to be prophets. In Islam the final prophet is recognised as Prophet Muhammad, may the mercy and blessings of God be upon him, who is also the only prophet to bring revelation from God after Jesus Christ. One of the tenets of Islam states that Muhammad is the final prophet.

Many Mormons wear what is often mockingly referred to as a special or magic under wear. This is a practice completely unknown to the followers of Christianity and Islam although it could be equated with the habit of using items of clothing as a good luck charm. Muslims categorically believe that there is no power or strength except from God Alone and they do not carry or wear talismans or charms of any kind. Christians however are not prevented by their religion from using or wearing a good luck talisman or charm.

In the Mormon Church the special underwear is known as a “garment” and according to the website dedicated to the temples of LDS, they are a symbolic gesture of the promises a Mormon makes to God. The garment is always worn under other clothing, next to the skin usually taking the place of regular underwear. Mormons begin wearing it during their first visit to the temple

when they undergo a sacred ceremony called the temple endowment. During this ritual, additional special clothing is put on but the “garment” is worn at all times, both day and night, from then on. “It serves as a constant reminder of the covenants made during the temple endowment.”^[1]

Mormon *churches* are dedicated public places of worship where Mormons and visitors can meet to pray, study scripture, partake of the sacrament, and continue to learn their responsibilities as children of God.

The *temples* however are dedicated place where sacred ordinances needed for eternal life are performed. Because of its sacred nature, attendance in the temples is limited to Mormons who obey God's commandments and therefore are the only ones worthy to enter.

Endowment ceremonies, which include blood and vengeance oaths, are administrated to Mormons in the temple. Apparently these are sacred ordinances and promises that make a person eligible for the highest heaven, and those Mormons considered worthy willingly partake in them during a visit to the temple. The endowments are considered vital to a person’s placement in the hereafter but can only be performed on earth. They are to a large degree secret; however in recent years many people dissatisfied with the church have left and revealed many aspects of the rituals. The ceremonies can last as long as five hours and can include ritual washing and anointing of the entire body and the receiving of a new name.

Needless to say such ceremonies do not exist in Christianity or Islam, however former members of the Mormon Church have pointed out the similarity of the secret rituals and Masonic rituals.

Mormonism contains many beliefs and actions that put it outside the fold of what could be termed normal Christian denominations. So much so that many Christian leaders have condemned the church as an unchristian cult. For a Muslim, Mormonism contains so many elements of the sin of ascribing partners to God Himself and other odd practices that there is barely any common ground between the two religions.

Footnotes:

^[1] (<http://www.ldschurchtemples.com/mormon/underwear/>)