

Leading Mormon discusses his church's unique beliefs

BY RICHARD N. OSTLING
The Associated Press

"Are we Christians? Of course we are! No one can honestly deny that," said Gordon B. Hinckley, president and prophet of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

But do Mormons consider Catholics, Protestants and the Eastern Orthodox Christians?

After all, founding prophet Joseph Smith Jr. said God directly taught him that "all their creeds were an abomination in his sight" and "they teach for doctrines the commandments of men."

Mormonism believes authentic Christianity vanished a century after Christ and was restored only through Smith in 19th-century America.

Yet Robert Millet, an important Brigham Young University scholar who advises the church on interfaith relations, in his book *A Different Jesus?: The Christ of the Latter-day Saints* (Eerdmans), assures non-Mormons that, yes, they're fellow Christians.

Richard Mouw, president of the evangelical Fuller Theological Seminary, urged Millet to write this book to explain Mormonism to outsiders. It's a timely — and controversial — contribution to the bicentennial observances of Smith's birth. (Millet and friend Mouw lead a private evangelical-Mormon dialogue.)

What does this faith of 12 million followers worldwide (5.5 million in the United States) say about the Bible? That's a complicated question.

Mormonism often seems conservative in affirming the literal history and miracles, yet liberal in criticisms of the Judeo-Christian scriptures.

Mormonism does recognize the Bible (using the King James Version only) as scriptural alongside Smith's own latter-day revelations. An official summary of teachings that Smith sent a Chicago newspaper in 1842 says "we believe the Bible to be the word of God as far as it is translated correctly."

What did that mean? Smith explained elsewhere that "many important points touching the salvation of men had been taken from the Bible, or lost before it was compiled."

He also said "ignorant translators, careless transcribers or designing and corrupt priests have committed many errors" while transmitting the original writings.

Smith said God revealed to him that "there are records which contain much of my gospel, which have been kept back because of the wickedness of the people" and commissioned him to bring forth "those parts of my scripture which have been hidden because of iniquity."

In 1830, Smith boldly began

issuing rewrites from the Bible. Though this was called "translation," the prophet did not work from ancient manuscripts, since he knew neither biblical Hebrew nor Greek. Rather, he asserted the unique power to revise God's word on the basis of personal revelations.

Smith altered some 3,400 verses through additions, deletions or other changes not found in biblical texts. Mormonism's "standard works" include parts of his revised Gospel of Matthew and Book of Genesis (the latter is called "The Book of Moses").

The Mormons' 1979 King James Version edition has an appendix with Smith revisions

from Exodus, 1 Chronicles, Psalms, Isaiah, Mark, Luke, John, Acts, nine New Testament epistles and Revelation.

Millet's work discusses other Mormon teachings that dispute beliefs mainstream Christianity has drawn from the Bible.

"Man is not of a lower order or different species than God," Millet said. Smith taught that God "has a body of flesh and bones as tangible as man's" and "was once a man."

Millet says Mormonism hasn't received authoritative explanations about "God's life before Godhood."

On Jesus Christ, Mormonism

teaches that he was the "first-born spirit child of God the Father" who over eons "grew in light and truth and knowledge and power until he had become 'like unto God.'" Then, "under the direction of the Father," Christ created the world. He was identical with Jehovah, "the premortal God of the ancients" who "eventually was born on earth as the man Jesus."

Millet says such latter-day revelations provide "clarification or additional information to the Bible" but don't "invalidate what went before."

"Supplementation is not the same as contradiction," he writes.

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