

The Mormon Godhead and the Christian Trinity

LEVI CHECKETTS



*Icon of the Holy Trinity, Vatopedi Monastery, Greece:
photo, courtesy of Wikimedia Commons*

In the nearly 180 years since Joseph Smith founded the Mormon religion, Mormons have always been at odds with mainstream Christianity. Among chief disputes has been the Christianity of Mormonism. Mainstream American Protestantism has, from the inception of Mormonism attacked the doctrine and theology of the Mormon Church for the radical differences between what one might consider “real” Christianity and Mormonism’s specific interpretation of Christian theology.

Levi Checketts is a graduate of the University of Notre Dame’s Theology Department.

With regards to the Trinitarian doctrine in the Mormon Church, the evidence suggests that Mormonism is not, Trinitarian Christian and a Mormon would find such great differences in the way in which they view the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit that they would find little to no common ground on the issue

in fact, Christian. The doctrine that the Mormon Church espouses concerning the “Godhead” differs so radically from the doctrine of more traditional Christian Church’s view of “Trinity” that the two seem to be irreconcilable. Thus, a Trinitarian Christian and a Mormon would find such great differences in the way in which they view the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit that they would find little to no common ground on the issue.

The Mormon view is one that developed independent of the councils and might appear to be one that one would expect from a religion without this theological background. The Mormon view sees the Father, Son and Holy Spirit as separate beings, and wholly different from each other in view, function and being. The Mormon view of scripture and revelation reflects one that might have developed had the Christian faith developed in a more Docetist (Ed. – the view that Jesus only appeared to be human) or Gnostic fashion. Thus the Mormon faith cannot be considered Christian, but at best proto-Christian.

THE GODHEAD IN THE EARLY DAYS OF MORMONISM

The Mormon Church, being a church that adheres to the primacy of newer revelation, has changed its views of the Godhead as more recent prophets of the church have revealed new doctrines. Just as Christianity spent the first three hundred years developing its doctrine on the Trinity, the Mormon Church has been developing its own doctrine of the Godhead.

Mormonism does not seem to have possessed the idea of distinction of persons as a doctrine in the first few years after it was founded. *The Book of Mormon*, Mormonism’s primary scripture and primary text, does not expressly separate the individual members of the Godhead, but in fact actually suggests a more Trinitarian formula at times.¹

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In multiple passages (Alma 11:44, 3 Nephi 11:27, 3 Nephi 11:36, Mormon 7:7 and others) expressly state that the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit are one. Furthermore, Jesus, in 3 Nephi 11:14 says, “Know that I am the God of Israel,” a statement which seemingly makes Jesus the same being as YHWH of the Hebrew Bible, and thus one with

the Father. *The Book of Mormon* was published in 1827 and the Mormon Church was founded three years later. As the primary scripture for Mormons, this book stands as a reflection of early Mormon thought, thought which does not betray itself as anti-trinitarian.

However, later in his life Joseph Smith would hand down many anti-Trinitarian revelations and at times prophesy directly against it. In the 1840s, a mere ten years after the inception of Mormonism, Joseph Smith would preach many distinct doctrines which, taken as a whole, compose a theology which would estrange Mormonism from Christianity in drastic ways. In 1842, Joseph Smith detailed the events of his first revelation from God, saying



Joseph Smith's First Vision: photo, courtesy of Wikimedia Commons

that he “saw two glorious personages who exactly resembled each other in features and likeness,”² and that “one of them spoke unto [him]...pointing to the other and said, ‘This is my beloved Son, hear him’.”³

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A year later, Smith had another revelation in which he prophesied that “The Father has a body of flesh and bones as tangible as man’s; the son also; but the Holy Ghost has not a body of flesh and bones but is a personage of spirit.”⁴ “It was further revealed to [Smith] that the Holy Ghost is a personage of spirit, distinct and separate from the personalities of the Father and the Son.”⁵ With this emphasis on the separate personalities in the Godhead we can derive a theology which is not only far removed from post-Nicene orthodoxy, but also seems polytheistic.

In 1844 Smith took then-apocryphal doctrine even closer to complete Gnosticism. Smith states that the Father, the “lead God”, organized a formal council with the other “Gods”. Here we can see a radical shift from Gnostic tendencies to full-blown Manichaeism or even blatant polytheism.

THE EVOLUTION OF MORMONISM'S TRINITARIAN THEOLOGY

If we view Mormon Theology from the time of Joseph Smith we see many moderating changes from the very anti-Trinitarian views manifested in the 1840s. For the rest of the nineteenth century and for the majority of the twentieth century, Mormon leaders and scholars still upheld the separation and distinction of the Godhead, but put more emphasis on attributes of unity.

Joseph Fielding Smith, descendant of Joseph Smith, Jr., and former president of the Mormon Church, in 1954 upheld his ancestor's teachings in emphasizing the distinctness of the members of the Godhead that Joseph Smith laid down.⁶ While he emphasized the distinction of the persons of the Godhead, he also stated that Mormons "worship the Father in the name of the Son"⁷ emphasizing the relationship of the Father and the Son through worship.

Twelve years later, Mormon apologist and church leader, Bruce McConkie, similarly discounts the Trinitarian view but places even more emphasis on the unity of the Godhead. For Bruce McConkie, the Trinitarian doctrine is one derived from councils convened after the Church of Christ and the apostles fell into a state of apostasy.⁸ McConkie also calls the three persons of the Godhead a "presidency", emphasizing their united function. He says that there was "an everlasting covenant made between the personages ... before the organization of the earth."⁹ McConkie's theology provides a

basis for being able to understand how the persons of the Godhead can work as one governing body.

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McConkie does, however, place a lot more emphasis on the unifying features. He states that they are one God, "united in attributes of perfection,"¹⁰ and that "these three are one, or in other words, these three constitute great, matchless, governing and supreme power over all things." He states that they are "alike in all things; yet they are separate and distinct entities,"¹¹ Thus we sense a bit of a movement towards a singular God manifest in the Trinity, but the distinction of the persons is maintained as separate and unyieldingly apart from each other.

MORMON'S DOCTRINE OF THE GODHEAD TODAY

Interestingly enough, today, the scholars and leaders of the Mormon Church place much more emphasis on the unity of the Godhead rather than on the separation of it. They still uphold their anti-Trinitarian views, however they contend that accepting these views or rejecting them has no basis for whether or not somebody is to be considered a Christian.

I had the opportunity personally to interview a few Mormon schol-

ars at Brigham Young University about Mormon theology in respect of the Godhead. I interviewed Spencer Fluhman, a Church History specialist, Robert Millet, a prominent Mormon apologist and David Paulsen, another

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apologist and Mormon philosopher. The main thing that all of them agreed on was the unity of God against God's separation, or, as Fluhman put it, "that God is united in everything but person."¹²

Contemporary leaders of the Mormon Church also share similar sentiments. Jeffrey Holland, a member of the Mormon Church's "Quorum of the Twelve Apostles", recently gave a televised sermon on the subject of the Godhead. In it, he claimed that "these three divine persons constituting a single Godhead are united in purpose, in manner, in testimony, in mission." While this sounds quite familiar, he further specifies "They are one in every significant and eternal aspect imaginable except ... [being] three persons combined in one substance."¹³ Bruce Porter, a member of the Mormon Church's "First Quorum of the Seventy", in a recent article published in *First Things Magazine*, specifies that Mormons take the idea of "one God" "to mean they are one in mind, purpose, will and intention."¹⁴

Concerning the doctrine of the Trinity, it seems that Mormon authorities are unanimous on this subject. The Nicene formula is "an over-elaboration ... [that] complicated the idea of God."¹⁵ The early creeds of the early Church (specifically Nicaea and Ephesus) "incorporate Hellenic ideas which are not based on revelation."¹⁶ Mormons also contend that their anti-Trinitarian view of the Godhead fits a model more contemporary with the New Testament than the Nicene Creed presents. "[Mormon] view of the Godhead breaks with post-New Testament Christian history and returns to the doctrine taught by Jesus Himself."¹⁷ Again, "if you were to talk to first century Christians, their beliefs in God would be like [Mormons]."¹⁸

The Mormon Church, though asserting themselves against traditional Christianity, does not deny the



Sarcophagus, 350 AD, Vatican Museums; photo, courtesy of Wikimedia Commons

Christianity of other churches like the Catholics and Reformers. Jeffrey Holland accepts the claim of other faiths to Christianity, but asks why it is that Mormons, with their supposed pre-Nicene view of the Godhead, are dis-

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missed in the Christian world. Mormons, in claiming Christianity, must, therefore, redefine what a Christian is against claims of Trinitarianism being a defining characteristic.

POPULAR MORMON OPINION

In an effort to understand how the average Mormon's beliefs differ from the average Trinitarian Christian's, I recently conducted a survey with Mormons, Catholics and other Christians concerning their specific beliefs on Trinitarian doctrines. In order to conduct the survey, I created an anonymous survey on the internet that consisted of 30 questions designed to evaluate the answerer's theological beliefs and interpretations of their specific faith tradition. To find participants, I emailed a variety of people whom I knew from various faith backgrounds, especially Mormons, Catholics and Evangelicals. I also asked these participants to invite as many people as they wanted to participate. Because the survey was anonymous, I cannot verify who participated and only know each

person's theological beliefs based on the survey. This survey was conducted over the course of four months, from May, 2009 until August, 2009, and yielded 60 participants. While this number can, by no means, be completely representative of all people of the faiths that participated, I feel that based on the trends in

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the survey, some general observations can be made and can provide a basis, by no means comprehensive, for comparing theological beliefs among different faiths.

While all Catholics and Evangelicals responded that there is only one God, Mormons were less likely to be as certain. The majority, 60%, were in agreement with their more traditional counterparts. However, 8% said there are two Gods, 12% said there are three Gods, and a full 20% said that they believed there are five or more Gods.

Concerning the members of the Trinity, there was even more disagreement. While Mormons, Catholics and Evangelicals alike agreed that the Father is God, there was not the same uniformity with the Son and the Holy Spirit. Evangelicals uniformly agreed that Jesus and the Holy Spirit were God, and Catholics agreed about four-fifths of the time. Mormons, however, only agree that Jesus is God about half the time, and that the Holy Spirit is less than 20%



Resurrected Jesus, Visitors' Center, Salt Lake City, Utah; photo, Steve Rohrbach

of the time. And while Catholics and Evangelicals together completely agreed that they worshipped all three, only 56% of Mormons said that they worshipped Jesus and only 16% said that they worshipped the Holy Spirit. When asked if there were any other gods, not a single Catholic or Evangelical answered that there were, but about 20% of Mormons said that there were.

Concerning the unity of the Trinity, an issue about which Robert Millet said “I would emphasize their oneness more than their separateness”, it would appear that Mormons are still not in agreement with other Christians. None of the Mormons who participated in the survey said that the Trinity was wholly one. The majority, 95%, said that they are one in purpose, but not one in being. Four-fifths of both Catholics and Evangelicals, on the other hand, said

that the Trinity was one, and only about a fifth of Catholics agreed with the majority of Mormons. Similarly, 75% of Mormons said that there is a hierarchy among the individual members of the Trinity, while only a fifth of Catholics and Evangelicals did.

My study then went on to ask questions about the individual members of the Trinity. What was somewhat astounding about opinions about the Father was general agreement across the board. Mormons and Trinitarian Christians alike agreed on the Eternity of the Father, His position above all and His manifestation as God, though Mormons are more likely to say that He is the only manifestation of God. What was surprising, however, was that 80% of Mormons agreed that the Father is subordinate to something, whether a superior God or some universal law,

while 80% of Evangelicals and 92% of Catholics said that the Father is not subordinate. Furthermore, though unsurprisingly, not a single Mormon said that the Son and the Father are one, though the majority of Catholics and Evangelicals said that they were.

When asked about the Son, Catholics and Evangelicals tended to respond that the Son is God, but Mormons' responses ranged from an affirmation of this, to Christ being a god, but not God and Christ not being divine. Aside from this, there weren't many questions on which there was much disagreement. However, it is the case that Catholics tend to view Christ more as a liaison between the Father and mankind much more than do Mormons.

The Holy Spirit was seen by Mormons to be more of a spiritual manifestation of God rather than actually being God. Over 80% of Catholics and Evangelicals said that the Holy Spirit is God, but less than a third of Mormons agreed with this. Catholics and Evangelicals were also much more likely to say that the Holy Spirit assumes the roles of both Creator and God than were Mormons (less than 25% of Mormons). Furthermore, when asked about the Holy Spirit's relationship with the Father, Mormons generally answered that the Holy Spirit witnesses to the Father while Catholics and Evangelicals tended to agree that the Holy Spirit is a manifestation of the Father's love. The same trend was observed, though with not the same unanimity, when asked about the relationship between the Son and the Holy Spirit. As pertaining to

the specific nature of the Holy Spirit, Mormons unanimously agreed that the Holy Spirit is a spiritual being while Catholics and Evangelicals were both almost perfectly split on whether the Holy Spirit is a spiritual being or the manifestation of God's love for us.

After this, my survey asked more general questions about the function of the Trinity. Here, there seemed to be a majority agreement on things such as the separation of roles between the members, and Jesus' death. However, a little more than a third of Mormons answered that God can be in all places at all times while more than 95% of Catholics and Evangelicals said that God can be in all places at all times.

In spite of the vast differences in answers, particularly between Mormons and their Catholic and Evangelical counterparts, Catholics, Evangelicals and Mormons all define themselves as Christians. It is clear that they do not share the same beliefs as each other, yet they all identify with the same title. Of course, this is the basis of the debate on which this article hopes to comment.

CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE IMPLICATIONS

It seems apparent that when we look at popular beliefs about the Trinity, we notice that Mormons stand out, even against belief systems as different as Roman Catholics and American Evangelicals. Mormons tend to conceive of a less omnipotent and less omnipresent view of the Trinity as a whole. It also seems more separated and less uni-

fied. Catholics and Evangelicals tend to be nursed on the Trinitarian formula, found in the Creeds, sermons, liturgies and Sunday School. Mormons, it would appear, are likely reared up in a similar fashion with their separated view of the Trinity taught to them as well.

So we see that from the point of view of laypeople, Christians are profoundly different in their beliefs from Mormons. However, simply because several people hold some set of ideas as their belief does not make it an official tenet of their faith. My survey also discovered that often times Catholics and Evangelicals would select answers to certain questions that are completely heretical with regards to Christian the-

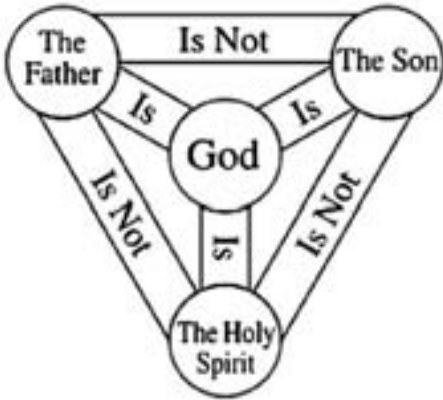
Thus, the most we can say with regards to the results of my survey is that the average Mormon tends to hold beliefs about the Trinity that are quite noticeably different from and should be heretical to the average Christian.

ology and doctrine. Theologians and scholars often have a better understanding of official doctrines and teachings than does the average layperson. Thus, the most we can say with regards to the results of my survey is that the average Mormon tends to hold beliefs about the Trinity that are quite noticeably different from and should be heretical to the average Christian.

However, the faith of the laypeople is not unfounded nor is it wholly heretical to Mormon doctrine. Popular Mormon belief reflects the evolution of Mormon doctrine over the last 180 years. This evolution has been drastic and elucidates the conflict over the definition of Christianity that is still in discussion. Conception of the Trinity in Mormon doctrine goes from being ambiguous with respect to the Trinitarian formula in the Book of Mormon, to being profoundly anti-Trinitarian in the 1840s, then towards their unifying aspects in the 1950s till today.

For all it is worth, their efforts are not enough. Being “nearly Christian” is not the same as being Christian. Jews and Muslims both have similar beliefs to Christians. Both believe in one God, both acknowledge the Hebrew Bible and God’s covenant with Abraham. Some even believe that Jesus was a great prophet. Some Muslims even claim that Jesus was the Son of God. However, we do not identify Jews or Muslims as Christians. Mormons do not even fully share the view that there is only one God. Mormons worship God in a fragmented way, similar to many heresies that the Christian Church condemned early on. Why then would we accept their view of the Trinity as being viable for Christianity?

Gerald R. McDermott, a professor of Religious Studies at Roanoke College and Mormon critic, said that were Mormons to drop their insistence on the revelations of Joseph Smith and accept Trinitarian Doctrine, then he would accept the as being genuinely



Shield of the Trinity; graphic, courtesy of Wikimedia Commons

Christian. While I doubt very much that Mormonism will reject the prophecies of Joseph Smith, or any of the their other Church Presidents for that matter, it seems that they are becoming more and more Christian in their views of the Trinity. If there was anything I gathered from my interviews and correspondences with those Mormon scholars whom I interviewed, it was that progressive Mormon thinking, especially in the academic arena, is departing from the doctrines of Smith in the 1840s and approaching the more Nicaean doctrines of Christianity.

It is important to remember, when considering all this, that Christianity spent its first three centuries developing the doctrines that later became Trinitarian Formula. As Fluhman said, “Mormonism isn’t to Nicaea yet.” Mormonism was founded in 1830. It hasn’t yet gone through the process Christianity went through in the first centuries that eliminated heresies and rooted out blasphemies. Given sufficient time, likely within the next hun-

dred years, it is my personal belief that Mormon doctrine will align itself with Christian doctrine of the Trinity. When this happens, I believe it will be fair to call Mormons Christian.

NOTES

¹ McDermot, Gerald. “Is Mormonism Christian?” p. 40.

² Smith, Joseph. “Wentworth Letter.” *History of the Church*. Vol. 4. Deseret Book Company: Salt Lake City, 1978. p. 536.

³ Smith, Joseph. “The First Vision.” *History of the Church*. Vol. 1. Deseret Book Company: Salt Lake City, 1978. p. 5.

⁴ Smith, Joseph. A revelation dated April 2, 1843 detailed in *Doctrine and Covenants*. Section 130 verse 22.

⁵ Smith, Joseph Fielding. “Joseph Smith Restored the Knowledge of God” *Doctrines of Salvation*. Vol. 1. p. 2

⁶ Smith, Joseph Fielding. “Joseph Smith Restored the Knowledge of God.” p. 2.

⁷ Smith, Joseph Fielding. “The Godhead.” *Doctrines of Salvation*. Vol. 1. p. 1.

¹⁸ McConkie, Bruce. “God as Spirit.” *Mormon Doctrine*. Publishers Press: Salt Lake City, 1966. p. 185.