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Christians, Mormons, and presidential primaries

Phyllis Zagano | Oct. 12, 2011 Just Catholic

Election time is rolling around. Time for everybody to get religion.

Or not.

When Southern Baptist pastor Robert Jeffress introduced Texas? Republican Governor Rick Perry at a gathering of Christian conservatives October 7, he called Perry ?a genuine follower of Jesus Christ.?

Pastor Jeffress later clarified his point: Mitt Romney is not a Christian. Mormonism is not Christianity. In fact, Jeffress said, it is a cult.

Ohh-kay. Throwing a little theological hardball here, Pastor Jeffress? Why does Mitt Romney need to sign on to the Apostles? Creed?

You think maybe Rick Perry is losing? You think maybe Mitt Romney is winning?

Here come the theological score cards. Even Whoopie Goldberg and ?The View? crew are parsing the Trinity.

Who is a Christian? Who is not? And, who cares?

Well, some Southern Baptists and Evangelicals seem to. And there may be other Protestants, as well as a few Catholics and Orthodox Christians rumbling around who want to examine the finer points of Mormonism.

The basics: The Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter-day Saints was founded in 1830 by Joseph Smith, Jr., who wrote down the Book of Mormon (the religious text, not the Broadway musical) after an encounter with the Angel Moroni in upstate New York. Subjected to severe bigotry for a good part of its history, recently the religion has quietly moved into mainstream American life.

For example, despite only 5.6 million church members in the U.S. -- 1.7 percent of the U.S. population -- Mormons occupy 15 Congressional seats. That?s almost 3 percent of the Congress.

The Famous Mormon List includes Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid (D-Nev.), Jeopardy champ Ken Jennings, Donny and Marie Osmond, Glenn Beck, and Stephen Covey, who wrote *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*. David Neeleman, who founded Jet Blue, is also a Mormon.

For the record, Mormons do not ascribe to essential Christian teachings regarding the divinity and humanity of Jesus, nor to the theology of the Trinity. Their theology argues their beliefs are more basic, and therefore more in keeping with the teachings of Jesus and his earliest followers.

Mormons are pretty straight-arrow. No cigarettes, no alcohol, not even any caffeine. They dress modestly, and are generally pretty upbeat. Their spirituality is specifically other-directed -- they tithe so other Mormons in need don?t have to depend on outsiders. Recent Mormon spiritual writers have put forth writings entitled ?The

Need for Greater Kindness,? and ?Developing a Personal Relationship with the Savior.?

Still, the big kids on the block say Mormons are not Christians.

So, what makes a Christian? And, why bring it up? What difference does a presidential candidate?s religious affiliation make?

At the start of the newly-released feature film ?The Ides of March,? Democratic presidential primary contender Governor Mike Morris (played by George Clooney) says he was raised Catholic, but his religion is the Constitution of the United States of America. Sounds good. Rather like John F. Kennedy in Houston in 1960, when the Deep South evidenced difficulties with a Catholic presidential candidate.

Is the current spat, as they say, déjà vu all over again? Several problematic themes run through the current religion and politics debate -- both for real and in the movie theatres. Is the discussion really about religion? Or is it about something else?

The electorate deserves a choice among, and eventually between, candidates of character and integrity. So, what does anyone?s religion have to do with it? Declaring religious adherence has typically been more an ethnic or cultural vote-getting strategy than an ethical badge of honor anyway. There is never any guarantee that ?being? whatever translates to decision-making consonant with whatever the voter thinks it means.

Of course we?re all entitled to set the ethical bar wherever we want, and some deeply religious folks are not all that happy with what?s happening in the White House these days.

Even Pastor Jeffress said he?d prefer Romney to President Obama, saying it is ?much better to vote for a non-Christian who embraces biblical values than to vote for a professing Christian like Barack Obama who embraces non-biblical values.?

Hmmm, as I have heard it said in Texas, Pastor Jeffress, ?them?s fightin? words.?

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