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Are Mormons Christians? by Stephen E. Robinson; *Offenders for a Word* by Daniel C. Peterson and Stephen D. Ricks

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STEPHEN E. ROBINSON. *Are Mormons Christians?* Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1991. ix, 133 pp. Index. \$8.95.

DANIEL C. PETERSON and STEPHEN D. RICKS. *Offenders for a Word*. Salt Lake City: Aspen Books, 1992. xiv, 212 pp. Bibliography, index. \$9.95.

Reviewed by Paul Hedengren, Professor of Philosophy, Brigham Young University.

Offenders for a Word and *Are Mormons Christians?* both address the familiar criticism that Latter-day Saints are not Christian. In different ways, each book argues that it is erroneous to claim that Mormons are not Christians.

Stephen E. Robinson's *Are Mormons Christians?* considers several general reasons given by critics for excluding Latter-day Saints from the category of Christians. For each reason, the book shows that exclusion is unjustifiable on religious, doctrinal, and historical grounds. Robinson considers criticisms that exclude Latter-day Saints by definition, by misrepresentation, by name-calling, by tradition, and on the grounds of canonical or doctrinal differences, especially those relating to the Latter-day Saint concept of God.

Daniel C. Peterson and Stephen D. Ricks's *Offenders for a Word* identifies twenty-two specific claims that have been made to support the proposition that Latter-day Saints are not Christian. The book then critically responds to each of those claims, primarily on historical, rhetorical, and linguistic grounds.

Each book does an admirable job supporting its arguments with appropriate historical sources. Both books are well written, but Robinson's is easier reading. Robinson presumes that his reader is basically familiar with, if not sympathetic toward, Latter-day Saint sources and concepts. Without encouraging contention, he hopes to help LDS Church members form "an intelligent and informed response" (viii). Peterson and Ricks have written to a more erudite audience with an interest in early Christian history, theology, and semantics. Both books are well documented, but *Offenders* is the more copiously footnoted of the two. Both volumes reason effectively against the objections some critics have

raised in urging that Mormons should not be called Christians. Each provides the reader with ample resources to reply to many common—and some not-so-common—arguments.

The books differ most significantly in the degree to which specific critics are identified and cited. Robinson rarely identifies the objectors. Sometimes he simply and effectively presents a personal experience in which he confronted a particular type of objection. Peterson and Ricks regularly identify the main critics and cite their publications.

Each approach has its advantages. By not citing specific critics, Robinson avoids promoting critics whose arguments are often insufficiently rational to warrant the serious attention of scholars. Were it not for the social influence of the critics and their effect on the uninformed, it is doubtful that such careful analysis of some of these objections would ever take place. By identifying specific critics, Peterson and Ricks facilitate further inquiry into the claims of these critics and give a clear sense of the hate motivating some of them. Such awareness dissipates complacency about maintaining religious freedom as a right.

But what of the central issue: Are Latter-day Saints Christian? This seems a simple question, one that should be easily answered in the affirmative. We could simply go to a dictionary to find explicitly stated common meanings of the term *Christian* and then examine whether Latter-day Saints meet this definition.

Robinson begins his book quoting the *Webster's Third New International Dictionary* definition of the word *Christian*. In part it reads: "One who believes or professes or is assumed to believe in Jesus Christ and the truth as taught by him" (1). Robinson's main point is that Latter-day Saints are Christians by this definition, since they believe in Jesus Christ and the truths taught by him (113-14). Thus, for example, excluding Mormons from the classification of Christian for a reason "that is [not] based . . . on one's belief in Christ" (43) is fallacious.

Given this definition, to deny that Latter-day Saints are Christian, one must either show that they do not believe in Jesus Christ or that they reject some truth taught by him. Nothing else will do. Yet contemporary critics regularly give other grounds for denying

that Latter-day Saints are Christians. Obviously, those critics are either illogical or have a different definition of *Christian* in mind; but if the focus of discussion can be kept to Webster's definition, it is very difficult for critics to defend logically the claim that Latter-day Saints are not Christian.

For example, if someone asserts that Latter-day Saints are not Christian because they reject the Nicene doctrine of the Trinity, the response is simple: *According to authoritative dictionaries, a Christian is one who believes in Jesus Christ and the truths he taught. Latter-day Saints do both. While they deny that Jesus taught the Nicene doctrine of the Trinity, can it be shown that Jesus taught this doctrine? He did not.* For good measure, one might add that the doctrine of the Trinity is not found in the teachings of the early Christians (Robinson, 88). But for Latter-day Saints to be Christian, it is only necessary to show that Jesus did not teach this doctrine.

The underlying issue, however, is often whether Webster's definition will suffice. And this is where Peterson and Ricks take up the argument. Most of their book is a study of definitions: How does the New Testament define *Christianity*? How do the Latter-day Saints compare with the earliest Christians? And if the early Christians were Christians, why aren't Latter-day Saints?

Offenders responds to the critics' claims in terms of what *Christian* means and who is in a position to determine its meaning. Allegations include assertions that Latter-day Saints worship a different Jesus, reject the divinity of Jesus, and believe in an anthropomorphic God; and that they believe man can become like God, the world was not created out of nothing, and human spirits had a premortal existence. These points overlap to a fair degree with several of Robinson's subsidiary points. *Offenders* then traces in considerable detail each supposedly non-Christian doctrine back to the teachings of early mainstream Christians or shows that the objection is otherwise ill conceived or illogical. The book ends with a hard-hitting essay on the abused and abusive term *cult* that many critics use propagandistically to stigmatize Latter-day Saints.

Both books clearly show that despite the newness of the claim that Mormons are not Christian, there is really nothing new in anti-Mormon literature. In the past, critics claimed that various Latter-day Saint doctrines and nondoctrines were false or strange. They now argue that Latter-day Saints are not Christian on account of such doctrines. The task of the defender of Latter-day Saint doctrine remains basically the same today as it was a century ago: show that the doctrines of the Restoration were taught anciently, are biblical, and are credible and true. What is new is the illogical allegation that on account of some Latter-day Saint doctrine, which is not shown to be inconsistent with the teachings of Jesus, Latter-day Saints are not Christian.

The thorough and clear examinations of these underlying criticisms make *Are Mormons Christians?* and *Offenders for a Word* exceptionally valuable additions to Mormon apologetics. These books will probably not put a stop to the efforts of extreme fundamentalists who seek to exclude by definition Latter-day Saints (as well as Catholics and many others for that matter) from the Christian fold. But the careful research and sincere expressions of Christian faith presented by the authors of *Are Mormons Christians?* and *Offenders for a Word* should provide answers to anyone who wonders how Latter-day Saints see themselves as Christian.