

## **Are Mormons Christian? And Seriously What is a Christian?**

My novel *Converting Kate* Viking Books, 2007, is about a high school girl, Kate, who breaks away from her religious past. She belongs to a fictional church, The Church of the Holy Divine. Interviewers or readers who find out that Kate's story was inspired by my experience as a fifth generation member breaking away from the Mormon Church often ask, "Why didn't you make Kate's religion Mormon?"

My answer--I didn't make it Mormon because I had just moved to the Bible Belt when I wrote this book and I discovered to my horror that Baptists, Born Agains, and the Fundamentalists, who made up most of my community preach and believe the same things I abhor and were the very issues that caused me to leave the Mormon church: a belief that homosexuality is evil, a male dominated hierarchy, encouraging women to stay at home and raise lots of children, and have a fear that exposure to books, movies, or worldly people will lead to worldly ways. But they also engage in an activity which scares me even more than the Mormon Church. They study Mormonism with a goal to prove it wrong.

This studying of Mormonism by other religions doesn't set well with me. Mormons *do* believe they are the only true church on the face of the earth, but they also believe that everyone is a potential convert, that God loves everyone and that everyone can be saved. They don't study other religions to prove them wrong. They already knew they're wrong. A very arrogant point of view, I know. Remember, I left. But somehow to hand pick a religion and rip it apart, well that seems, even more unchristian to me.

Since my book has come out, I've been invited to do several interviews on *Christian* radio stations. (I no longer accept interviews with this type of stations). It seems I was invited so they could get the inside scoop on all the bad things the Mormons were doing and show their audiences that yes, the Mormons are bad, Mitt Romney is bad, and Mormons are not Christian. Ironically what they thought was bad about the Mormons and what I thought was bad about the Mormons were not the same things at all. For some in the religious right it isn't good enough to believe in Jesus Christ and view him as the Savior of the world, which is central to Mormon theology. It isn't good enough to love

your family and be honest, hardworking people. No, the fact that Mormons have another book of scripture, practice secret rites in the temple and believe men and women can become Gods and Goddesses means they are not Christian. So my question then to those radio show hosts, their listeners and those generally part of the Christian Right who are so sure Mormons are not Christian, is this, “What is a Christian?” I am seriously confused.

I remember this song I was taught as a little girl in Sunday School. “Jesus said love everyone. Treat them kindly too.” I may be simple, but I always thought that being Christian basically meant being kind—the end.

Last week while I was in Miami, Florida I was able to visit a Holocaust Memorial. And while there I had an epiphany. On the marble wall is etched a map of Europe and the number of Jews killed in each country. I’ve read a lot about the Holocaust but even though I was familiar with the vast numbers of exterminated men, women and children, I still felt that chilly horror grab at my heart as I saw the numbers etched on the wall. 3,000,000 killed in Poland, 1,000,00 killed in Russia. The numbers alone always make me cry. Other etching depicted images of starving people and piles of bones and flesh. It’s more than one heart can bear.

However, as I looked across the map to Denmark I saw in stark contrast the number 77. Seventy seven people killed simply because they were Jewish is beyond horrible, unspeakable. Yet, I knew if it were not for the courage of the Danish citizens that number could have been a lot higher. Some records say Denmark saved 99% of their Jewish population. In the emotional turmoil I was feeling right then, this number, seventy-seven, relatively small compared to the adjacent countries of Holland, and Germany who each had over a 100,000 exterminated gave me some hope. Denmark was the only occupied country that actively resisted the Nazi regime's attempts to deport its Jewish citizens. When news spread that Jews were being gathered and taken from their homes many Danes offered their support, conveying warnings and finding places for the Jews to hide. Danes felt that persecution of minorities was a breach of their culture and something they would not stand for. I don’t think Denmark then was known as a Mecca for religion, I don’t know if Danes went to church every Sunday or read their Bibles, but they certainly were a people known for religious tolerance.

So I left the memorial with a lighter heart and a hope for the future. I'm still not so sure what being a *Christian* means, but I knew to me, it really no longer mattered. What matters is that I try to live a life of tolerance, respect and non-judgment. If I could be half as good a human being as the people who saved the Jews in Denmark I would be proud to look at myself in the mirror.