



ILLUSTRATION BY CHRISTOPHER CHERRINGTON | The Salt Lake Tribune

## Ideally, there should be room for all in my 3 degrees of Latter-day Saint faith glory

There are as many levels of faith in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints as there are members, basically because no two believers are exactly alike.

But, by my observation, those individual believers can be grouped into three general categories, and it's worth discussing which, if any, of those clusters is not so much better, but...no, yeah, better.

My three degrees of (faith) glory include: the Automatics, the Contemplatives and the Suspicious.

### The Automatics

The Automatics are the churchgoers who accept and obey whatever they're told and taught. They approach gospel topics with a monolithic attitude of compliance, without question. If Russell Nelson or any of the church's prophets says it, it must be God's truth. If apostle Jeffrey Holland says to pull out the metaphorical muskets, then, in the name of Moses, they're going to pull out the muskets. If they read something in the Bible — New or Old Testament — or the Book of Mormon or the Doctrine and Covenants or the Pearl of Great Price or even in a church magazine, they glom onto it like a Plott Hound on a pound of porterbouise. If the Good Book says Noah gathered every species of every creature, two by two, and loaded them into a boat for 40 days and 40 nights of rain and flooding, that's exactly how it went down. And Jonah was, in fact, swallowed by that whale.

These folks are fervent, easy believers. And that's what works for them. When they go to church, they not only want to hear the good, traditional word, the same word that many of them were fed when they were Primary children, they also want to feel comfortable



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doing it.

That means they crave orthodoxy. They hold to the iron rod in the same manner Grandma and Grandpa did 50 years ago. They like church stuff done the way they've always been done. These are the people who thought the shift from a three-hour meeting block on Sunday to two hours was an example of radical change, and when BYU started selling Coke and Diet Coke on campus, they accepted it as the Almighty's will because, well, that's what they do, but it was an adjustment. They want gospel teachings kept simple, unquestioned and unchallenged. They want Sunday school classes to focus on pure doctrine and only pure doctrine.

They are the kind who favor a Dallin Oaks sermon over a Dieter Uchtdorf talk but will embrace both because neither leader would ever be allowed to lead the church or its members astray.

The main problem with this group — and maybe with all three groups — is that they often are convinced that every Latter-day Saint should believe the same way they believe, that automatic acceptance and obedience are more righteous, more worthy, more of what God wants. They thus judge those who pursue and maintain their faith differently.

### The Contemplatives

The Contemplatives go about

their worship, like the label implies, with all sorts of thoughts banging around inside their noggin. They believe. They're converted. They're committed. That belief, that conversion, that commitment, though, sometimes slide a bit. They hunger for tidbits that grow their faith, but what they relish more than anything isn't the established church party line. It's something even deeper: truth.

These types ask questions, a lot of questions, that make the Automatics nervous. They wonder about the Old Testament story of Abraham hauling his son Isaac off to an isolated spot, where he could burn him to death because that's what God asked him to do, stopping at the last moment, as it turned out, because it was all just a test. They want to explore gospel teachings in and out of Sunday meetings. They want discussion — to see how principles of faith can be pragmatically applied to their lives. They wonder about church practices and doctrines of the past, things like polygamy and the priesthood/temple ban on Black members. They question practices and doctrines of the present, like how they can better understand, connect with and, yes, accept their LGBTQ brothers and sisters and keep them in the fold. They read the family proclamation and love parts of it and are troubled by other parts. They thirst to hear and embrace the word of God but also ask why women aren't treated equally in the church, why leaders of women's organizations can't sit on the stand during Sunday meetings, and why so few women speak at General Conference.

They wonder why church leaders hoist up the blessing of agency but then hammer the importance of members, especially women, wearing temple garments. They wonder about the afterlife

“*[Contemplatives] wonder about the afterlife doctrine regarding the three degrees of glory, how that will work out for their family and friends who follow a different faith path, or no path, in this life.*”

doctrine regarding the three degrees of glory, how that will work out for their family and friends who follow a different faith path, or no path, in this life. Will they be trapped in a certain kingdom separate from loved ones because of their actions here or will there be eternal progression for everyone?

They ponder these things in and along their faith journey because they are significant to them and because church doctrines stir in them these kinds of thoughts. They believe God wants them to think things through, to use their cognitive processes in conjunction with the force of faith to live complete lives, here and in the hereafter. They want it to make sense. They believe and trust in Jesus Christ, rely on him and his Atonement, in the same way the Automatics do, and are grateful for the faith they have found. Mostly, they allow their faith to bridge the gaps along their way.

This group sometimes looks at the Automatics as though they seriously lack sophistication, but, more than anything, they don't want their faith questioned simply because they ask questions.

### The Suspicious

The Suspicious are those who are barely hanging on and, in some cases, are headed out. It's not so much that they have lost their faith in God; it's that they've lost their faith in the church. Unlike the way they are branded by some churchgoers, they aren't searching for the easy way out, for a life of wild and raucous living, and they aren't slipping away because they're not strong enough to stay in either of the first two groups. It's because they no longer have a deep belief in what the church teaches and how it teaches it, or, in a comprehensive sense, because of what they've seen, heard and experienced among humans in the faith.

Many in this group don't hate the church; some don't leave it. Some go to church because other family members go, and they don't want to cause a stir among their loved ones who still are fervent in their faith. They're either along for the ride because it's convenient, because it's advantageous in their work and social settings, or because, deep down, there's a part of them that hopes there might be some truth in it. Some have all but left the building because, after so many years of holding on despite their doubts, they really suspect it's bogus.

Ideally, there's room in the church for the Automatics, the Contemplatives and the Suspicious, for everybody with at least a particle of faith. We can all get along. With God's good graces reaching out, that's the way it should be.

## Could the rise of America's nonreligious be over? That depends on who you ask.

New data suggests a three-year slowdown in the growth of the “nones” — those who profess no religious ties — but experts disagree on what it means.

By TAMARRA KEMLEY

The Salt Lake Tribune

The seasons changed. The Utah Jazz broke fans' hearts. And the number of Americans cutting loose from organized religion grew like alfalfa under the summer sun.

So it went, as inevitable as rush hour traffic on Interstate 15, for 30 years.

Summer still follows spring and the Utah Jazz are still “rebuilding,” but a massive dump of new data on religion in America suggests that the fastest-growing religious group from 1991 to 2021 may have run out of gas, at least for now.

This was the conclusion that

Ryan Burge, associate professor of political science at Eastern Illinois University, came to after combing through the findings of Harvard University's 2023 Cooperative Election Survey (CES).

The report, released this month and based on more than 24,500 respondents nationwide, prompted the stats-loving Burge to declare in his latest newsletter, “It has become crystal clear to me now: The share of nonreligious Americans has stopped rising in any meaningful way.”

### UNDERSTANDING AMERICA'S NONRELIGIOUS

America's “nones” — atheists, agnostics and those who describe their religion as “nothing in particular” — are younger and more liberal than the country's religiously affiliated, according to a recent study by the Pew Research Center.

Based on responses from more than 3,300 participants, the report found that most in this group believe in God or some higher power but reject the concepts of heaven and hell. Strict nonbelievers — those

who don't believe in God or a higher power, the human soul or any kind of life after death — made up about 20% of respondents.

The group is not uniformly anti-religion, with many expressing a belief that institutions of faith do good while also causing some harm.

Education levels, meanwhile, are mixed between the more educated atheists and agnostics, versus the “nothing in particular” crowd, who tend to have less schooling than the average religious adult in the United States.

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