

## Daniel Burke/Religion News Service/Reporter of the Year entry

### With Petraeus, echoes of that other warrior David

Daniel Burke | Nov 14, 2012

(RNS) It's tempting to view the sex scandal surrounding retired Army Gen. David Petraeus through a religious lens.

After all, most faiths forbid adultery, and even before his fall from grace, some Pentagon colleagues compared Petraeus to the biblical King David -- another proud and powerful warrior.

The comparison seemed even more apt after the former four-star general's resignation from the CIA on Friday.

"More than one officer cited the biblical adultery of King David and Bathsheba," wrote The New York Times.

The Bible says that David acted righteously and kept God's commandments -- except in the case of Uriah the Hittite, Bathsheba's husband.

"Will history remember David Petraeus with the same caveat?" asked Jim Denison, a Southern Baptist scholar in Dallas.

Even liberals saw the scandal in religious terms, albeit from the opposite pole.

"Don't understand why `adultery' is quasi-illegal in a nation in which church & state are separate," tweeted the renowned novelist Joyce Carol Oates. "The ugly word `bastard' has been phased out of usage & next should come `adultery' with its Biblical rectitude & cruelty."

But the military's anti-adultery rules are not based on religion, biblical or otherwise, said Lt. Col. Todd Breasseale, a Pentagon spokesman.

"To be clear, it has nothing to do with a religious version of what morality is and everything to do with maintaining good order and discipline," he said.

Article 134 of the Uniform Code of Military Justice criminalizes adultery when three elements are met: two people had sex, one of them was married, and their conduct compromised military discipline and order or brought "discredit upon the armed forces."

The rules may seem archaic to modern Americans but they are essential to the military, where officers and soldiers entrust their lives to each other, said Breasseale.

Imagine a senior officer having an affair with an enlisted soldier's spouse. "His decision-making would rightly be second-guessed," Breasseale said, "and that would cause a ripple-effect through the unit."

Bible readers may remember that King David ordered his troops to abandon Uriah on the battlefield so that

the cuckolded husband would be killed, surely a worst-case scenario.

As in civilian America, extramarital affairs are fairly common in the military, experts said, as soldiers spend long tours of duty stationed far from home.

Adultery tends to be prosecuted only when the conduct is egregious, when it accompanies other crimes like sexual misconduct, or when a high-ranking officer is involved.

"It's hard to make the case when I'm representing a senior military officer on adultery that the good order and discipline of the unit was not affected," said [Victor M. Hansen](#), a professor at New England Law in Boston.

For 15 years, Hansen served as an Army Judge Advocate General and later represented accused officers in military courts as a defense attorney.

The military prides itself on maintaining high moral standards. Soldiers can still be prosecuted for "conduct unbecoming an officer and a gentlemen," after all.

"We're asked to do the nation's hardest work," Breasseale said. As it conducts dangerous missions, the military needs soldiers who follow orders and officers with uncompromised ethics, he said.

There's little chance Petraeus, the most heralded officer of his generation, will face adultery charges, said military law experts. For one thing, the ex-general retired from the Army to take the CIA post. A former Petraeus spokesman says the affair began after the general had left the Army.

Still, the scourge of public censure must sting the pride of a man who cultivated a stainless persona.

"He'd always preached to his proteges that character was what you did when no one was watching," writes [Vernon Loeb of The Washington Post](#).

Petraeus also preached about the significance of spirituality, according to Army Chaplain Col. Brent Causey, who spent 13 months with the general in Afghanistan. Nearly half of the service-members stationed with the general regularly attended chapel, Causey said.

"It was a reflection of Gen. Petraeus and his leadership in placing importance on spirituality," [Causey told Baptist Press last year](#). "Gen. Petraeus focused on everyone's spirituality, not just Christianity."

Asked about Petraeus' own faith, Causey, who now serves with the Army Corp of Engineers in Washington, said, "Sorry, I'm not allowed to talk about that," and quickly hung up.

Breasseale, who worked with Petraeus, said he never heard the general express particular religious or political preferences.

Petraeus has never been beloved by anti-war liberals, though, especially those who see evangelical Christianity creeping over the military's church-state wall.

The Military Religious Freedom Foundation chided the general for endorsing "[Under Orders: A Spiritual Handbook for Military Personnel](#)," a book by former military chaplain William McCoy. The MRFF says the

book promotes Christianity and denigrates agnostic and atheist soldiers.

If Petraeus still harbors political aspirations, now might a good time for him to get religion and read that book. "If he licks his wounds and is seen praying humbly at his local church and does the right thing by his wife and family, America will probably forgive him," writes Jon Lee Anderson of the New Yorker.

For what it's worth, it seems like evangelical broadcaster Pat Robertson already has.

"The man's off in a foreign land, he's lonely and here's a good-looking lady throwing herself at him," Robertson said during a recent broadcast of the "The 700 Club."

"I mean, he's a man."

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## Splinter churches realign Protestantism

Daniel Burke | Feb 27, 2012 |

RNS) There's a popular saying in church-planting circles: It's easier to make babies than to raise the dead.

That axiom applies to denominations as well, said the Rev. Paul Detterman, who helped found the Evangelical Covenant Order of Presbyterians in January.

"We thought it was easier in the long run to create something new rather than to keep on trying to modify existing forms," he said.

The "existing form," in Detterman's case, was the Presbyterian Church (USA), which remains the nation's largest Presbyterian denomination despite a decades-long plunge in membership.

The ECO may steepen that decline.

Thousands of conservative Presbyterians, upset over the PC(USA)'s vote to lift a ban on partnered gay and lesbian clergy last year, are eyeing the new group. Planning for the ECO, which will not ordain sexually active gays and lesbians, preceded the gay clergy vote, Detterman said.

The ECO represents the third new mainline Protestant denomination since 2008 to split from a national church following elections to permit partnered gay and lesbian clergy.

The Anglican Church in North America formed in late 2008, five years after the Episcopal Church consecrated an openly gay bishop in New Hampshire. In 2010, a year after the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America voted to allow partnered gay and lesbian clergy, conservatives founded the North American Lutheran Church.

Leaders of the three new denominations say allowing gay clergy was the breaking point for conservatives, after years of dissatisfaction with overbearing bureaucracies, membership losses and liberal theology.

Pessimistic about changing that course from within, conservatives jumped ship instead.

"When orthodox and conservative Christians made homosexuality their flash-point issue, and they lost those struggles, in many ways they had no choice but to create these new structures," said Mark Tooley, president of the Institute for Religion & Democracy, a conservative Washington-based advocacy group.

The question now is whether these breakaway groups signal a seismic shift in American Protestantism, or just a few fissures in the theological terrain.

In some ways, the rifts are nothing new. American Protestants have been splintering since Roger Williams left Plymouth Colony in the 1630s, said Nancy Ammerman, a sociologist of religion at Boston University.

Yet the schisms counter a 20th-century trend in which ethnic and regional Protestant groups merged to form big-tent denominations such as the ELCA and PC(USA).

"What we may be experiencing at this point is the limit of that movement to draw a lot of diversity under one umbrella," said Ammerman, author of "Pillars of Faith: American Congregations and Their Partners."

Archbishop Robert Duncan, ACNA's leader, said the new denominations herald a burgeoning movement.

"There is a Reformation going on in the Christian church, particularly in the West, and particularly in the mainline Protestant denominations," he said.

Duncan's ACNA seeks to supplant the Episcopal Church as the U.S. branch of the worldwide Anglican Communion.

But some religion scholars say the new denominations are heading down a demographic dead end unless they can broaden their appeal beyond conservatives upset over pro-gay church policies.

"Public opinion about gays and lesbians and gay marriage are changing so dramatically that at some point in the future -- 10 years, let's say -- it's not going to matter very much," said Robert Wuthnow, a sociologist and director of the Center for the Study of Religion at Princeton University.

Wuthnow and other scholars say American Protestantism provides fertile ground for offshoots, with membership losses in one denomination often encouraging the outgrowth of another.

"People worry that they may be on the wrong track and decide to start something new," Wuthnow said.

The Episcopal Church, ELCA and PC(USA) have lost members for years, as have many North American denominations, conservative and liberal alike.

Still, all three denominations dwarf their splinter groups.

The Anglican Church in North America counts 719 member congregations; the Episcopal Church has more than 7,000. The North American Lutheran Church counts about 300 congregations, compared to the ELCA's nearly 10,500. The ECO is just getting off the ground, while the PC(USA) has more than 11,000 churches.

"The size is not as important to me as the faithfulness of what we've been challenged to do and to be in terms of our identity," said NALC's Bishop John Bradosky.

In some cases, the new denominations have cooperated to meet those challenges.

The new Lutheran church plans to partner with a conservative Anglican seminary in Pennsylvania, and the two denominations may even share clergy, leaders said.

Lutherans also said the Anglicans advised them not to wait too long to create their new denomination.

"They acknowledge that they took too much time in putting together an alternative to the Episcopal Church and lost a lot of good lay leaders," said the Rev. Mark Chavez, NALC's general secretary.

The Anglican breakaway group also has been hampered by lawsuits and infighting. The Episcopal Church has sued to keep property claimed by departing congregations, and has won in most cases after costly and protracted litigation.

Late last year, the ACNA lost one of its bigger members, the Anglican Mission in the Americas, after a bitter power struggle between its American and African leaders.

"The present reality is brokenness," Duncan wrote in a Dec. 20, 2011 letter to ACNA members.

The dispute worried Episcopal Bishop Edward Little of Northern Indiana, who counts numerous friends in the ACNA.

After the Episcopal Church began ordaining women in the late 1970s, four bishops left to create a new church, which then split into dozens of smaller denominations with more bishops than members, Little said.

"A very sad tale indeed," Little wrote in a recent email to a conservative blogger.

"And, sadly as well, that pattern seems to be repeating itself with this newer iteration of Anglican breakaways."

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## Are Mormons Christian? It's complicated

Daniel Burke | Jan 19, 2012

(RNS) Ask Mormons if they are Christian, and their answer often starts with a sigh.

Look at our name, they'll say, The Church of *Jesus Christ* of Latter-day Saints. Read The Book of Mormon's subtitle, "Another Testament of *Jesus Christ*." Examine our Articles of Faith, "We believe that through the *Atonement of Christ*, all mankind may be saved..."

"When we read in the press that some religious person who should know better refers to us as non-Christian, it is baffling to us," said Michael Otterson, the church's head of public affairs. "To suggest that we don't embrace Christ and his sacrifice for all of us is insulting."

Yet nearly a quarter of Americans remain unconvinced, according to a recent poll conducted by The Salt Lake Tribune. The Vatican and several Protestant churches do not accept Mormon baptisms as legitimate (neither do Mormons recognize theirs), and some conservative evangelicals call Mormonism a "cult."

Mormons, meanwhile, believe they belong to the one true Christian church.

The debate might have remained relegated to Sunday school discussions and interfaith summits were it not for the presidential candidacy of Mitt Romney, a devout Mormon and onetime LDS bishop.

While the former Massachusetts governor and current GOP frontrunner has muted religious talk during this campaign, he indirectly addressed the Mormon-Christian issue during his previous White House bid.

"There is one fundamental question about which I often am asked," he said in a 2007 speech in Texas. "What do I believe about Jesus Christ? I believe that Jesus Christ is the son of God and the savior of mankind."

Stressing the similarities between Mormonism and mainstream Christianity makes political sense.

Republicans who say Mormons are not Christian are less likely to view Romney favorably or support his campaign, according to a November survey by the nonpartisan Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life.

During the 2007 speech, Romney acknowledged that "my church's beliefs about Christ may not all be the same as those of other faiths."

But explaining theological arcana is not a politician's job, he argued. It amounts to a religious test for office, which the Constitution forbids.

Still, the debate lingers around Romney's campaign: Are he and fellow Mormons Christians? The question seems simple enough, but the answer is quite complicated.

### **Who's in and Who's Out?**

According to "The Atlas of Global Christianity," there are 41,000 Christian denominations.

No definition of Christianity could encompass their doctrinal diversity, said Martin Marty, an emeritus professor at the University of Chicago Divinity School.

"I wish there was some official place where you could determine who's in and who's out, but there's not. No one can speak for all of Christianity in all its nuances."

The atlas lists Mormonism as a "marginal" Christian group, along with Jehovah's Witnesses and the Rev. Sun Myung Moon's Unification Church, primarily because it deviates from traditional Christian teachings on Jesus and claims sources of revelation beyond the Bible.

The "marginal" category is not a perfect fit and rings a pejorative tone, said Todd Johnson, editor of the atlas and director of the Center for the Study of Global Christianity at Gordon-Conwell Seminary.

"It's not a category that helps you understand what these groups believe," he said. "It's just saying that they have something besides the Bible that is quite significant."

For centuries, most Christians have relied a closed canon of scriptures and creeds to draw the circle of membership. Catholics, Anglicans, Eastern Orthodox Christians and many Protestant churches recite the 4th Century Nicene Creed, for example, which states foundational Christian tenets.

Mormonism's founding prophet, Joseph Smith, blasted open the Christian canon and cast aside the creeds.

At a time when religious revivals engulfed his Upstate New York homestead, a 14-year-old Smith reported a vision of God and Jesus, who told him that the Christian churches had fallen into apostasy.

A second vision directed Smith to a stack of buried golden plates, according to LDS Church history. The plates, which became The Book of Mormon, told of an ancient society visited by Jesus in North America that was destroyed by warring tribes.

With the impatience of a prophet, Smith set out to restore the Christian church.

He revised the Bible; reported receiving "keys to the priesthood" from John the Baptist; rejected the traditional idea of the Trinity as three-gods-in-one; taught that God was once a flesh-and-blood man, and that men could become gods through purification and obedience to the church.

They were all radical departures from centuries of Christian orthodoxy. And intentionally so.

Smith's Latter-day Saints consider The Book of Mormon as much a part of God's word as the Bible, and continue to honor their top leader as "prophet, seer and revelator."

"Take away the Book of Mormon and the revelations," Smith said, "and where is our religion? We have none."

### **The Fourth Abrahamic Faith?**

Jan Shipps, the preeminent non-Mormon expert on the LDS church, draws a comparison between the early Christians and Latter-day Saints.

Both introduced new scriptures and ideas to established religions, and insisted that their new faith fulfilled the old. Christians added the New Testament to Judaism, and Smith added The Book of Mormon to Christianity.

Richard Land, an ethicist with the Southern Baptist Convention, goes even further, calling Mormonism "the fourth Abrahamic faith," after Judaism, Christianity and Islam.

Like Muslims, Land said, Mormons receive the Old and New Testament as sacred texts, but not as the final divine word. Like Islam's Prophet Muhammad, Smith is considered an authoritative vessel of God's word.

"Whatever it is, Mormonism is not Christianity," Land said.

Mormons' unique doctrines on the Trinity, the divinity of God and the potential divinity of humans departs from traditional Christian theology, Land said.

Evangelicals like Land tend to be the most keen to keep Mormons from the Christian camp, according to numerous surveys.

In addition to doctrinal concerns, conservative Christians worry about sheep-stealing Mormon missionaries.

"It's a pragmatic decision to call (Mormons) non-Christian, to protect church members from Mormon evangelism," Johnson said.

But even Catholics and more liberal Protestants, such as the Presbyterian Church (USA), the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and the United Methodist Church, do not consider Mormon baptisms valid.

"The church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, by self-definition, does not fit within the bounds of the historic, apostolic tradition of Christian faith," the Methodists wrote in 2000.

### **Cherishing Mormon Distinctiveness**

Mormons do not deny their differences with traditional Christianity. In fact, they are more likely to say their religion resembles Judaism than evangelical Protestantism, according to a recent survey conducted by the Pew Research Center.

Otterson says Mormons cherish their distinctiveness, much as Catholics or Methodists show special devotion to their traditions. But Mormon leaders have also sought to tie their unique theology to the earliest Christians, using the ancient past to sanction the present.

For example, Jesus and his disciples didn't cite the Nicene Creed, or any creed for that matter, said Elder Jeffrey R. Holland, a member of the LDS Church's Quorum of Twelve Apostles.

And, the idea of a flesh-and-blood God should not sound strange to Christians, who, after all, believe in the bodily birth and resurrection of Jesus, Holland added.

Christians who insist on a single, closed canon forget that Catholics and Protestants use different versions of the Bible, argues Stephen Robinson, a professor of religion at Mormon-run Brigham Young University in Utah.

And didn't differing interpretations of the Trinity contribute to the Great Schism between the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches in 1054?

Mormon theologian Robert Millet has been laboring to convince Christians that the Mormon idea of deification -- humans becoming gods -- resembles the mystical union with the divine taught by early church fathers like St. Augustine.

But Millet said he worries more about the opinions of Christians in the pews than the specialized scholars

who read his books.

"When people call Mormons non-Christian, they might believe that we do not accept Jesus Christ as Lord and savior, or believe in the New Testament," Millet said.

"We don't want to fight about this. We just wish people would get it right."

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