

Romney's Mormon faith no presidential obstacle, some say: Ability to reach across religious divisions is key

News in the [August 8, 2006](#) issue

When John F. Kennedy ran for president in 1960, he was the first Catholic to seek the Oval Office. To win, he had to convince non-Catholic voters that, among other things, he wouldn't take orders from the pope.

Now another Massachusetts politician with an eye on the White House —Republican governor Mitt Romney, a Mormon—faces a similar problem as he confronts suspicions among his party's base that his church is at best a non-Christian sect and at worst a cult.

A recent Bloomberg/*Los Angeles Times* poll shows what Romney may be up against. Fully 37 percent of Americans said they would not vote for a Mormon candidate. Only Muslim candidates, at 53 percent, had higher negative ratings.

In order to mute questions about Mormon theology and practice, Romney, like Kennedy, will have to declare his independence from his church—but with a twist: whereas voters once needed to know that a candidate's faith would remain private, many voters today, especially Christian conservatives, need to be assured that a candidate's faith will guide his or her decisions—even if, as in Romney's case, they don't agree with its doctrine.

“It can't be a repeat,” said Charles Haynes, a First Amendment scholar at the Freedom Forum in Arlington, Virginia, and an expert on American religious and political history. “His Kennedy moment has to be much more nuanced. He has to speak the language of faith without being too particular” because of the differences between his faith and traditional Christianity. “And he has to assure the rest of the country that he can reach across these religious divisions and party lines and be president of all the people.”

Richard John Neuhaus, editor of *First Things*, a magazine of conservative Christian thought and opinion, also thinks Romney will have to make a Kennedyesque speech. But, he cautions, there are risks. “He runs the very great risk of alienating his Mormon supporters if he distances himself too far from the [Mormon] Church,” he said. “And it could also alienate a lot of evangelicals who may see it as a waffling about religious convictions.”

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, based in Salt Lake City, and traditional Christians do have their differences. Both take the Bible as holy scripture, but Mormons have additional sacred texts, including the Book of Mormon, which they believe was divinely revealed to their prophet, Joseph Smith, in 1830.

Mormons believe that theirs is “the one true church,” something that riles traditional Christians. Mormons also believe that God has a physical body.

Scott Gordon, president of the Foundation for Apologetic Information and Research (FAIR), an organization that defends Mormon theology, says those differences need not be insurmountable. “He's got to say his faith will have an impact, but his denominational beliefs will not,” he said.

The church is politically neutral, says Michael Otterson, a Mormon spokesperson. “We ask LDS candidates not to imply in any way that they are endorsed by the church.”

Romney graduated from Brigham Young University and did a missionary stint in France. Prior to his election as governor he served as a regional stake president overseeing Mormon congregations. He is the father of five and grandfather of nine.

Robert Millet, a professor of ancient scriptures at Brigham Young University, says Romney must address his religious beliefs before others try to exploit the Mormons’ history with polygamy (outlawed in 1890) and racism (African Americans were denied full membership until 1978).

Romney may not be willing to do that. His office declined requests for an interview with RNS, and in a June interview on *The Charlie Rose Show*, he deflected specific questions about his religion.

“If you have doctrines you want to talk about, go talk to the church,” Romney told interviewer Judy Woodruff when she asked about specific Mormon beliefs. “Because that’s not my job,” he added.

Romney is not the first Mormon to face opposition to his faith in pursuit of the presidency. His father, Michigan governor George Romney, ran for the Republican nomination in 1968, losing to Barry Goldwater. Conventional wisdom at the time was that his faith was more hindrance than help.

Senator Orrin Hatch, a Republican and a Utah Mormon, ran for the GOP nomination in 2000 and lost to George W. Bush, an evangelical. “I was hoping to expose and eliminate some of the prejudice against Mormons, and I think we made some headway,” Hatch said in a telephone interview.

Indeed, Mitt Romney easily won two terms in heavily Catholic—and Democratic—Massachusetts.

Some observers believe that Romney will shift the focus toward his stances shared with conservative Christians, such as opposition to abortion, gay marriage and stem cell research, to name a few.

What’s more, “I am guessing that my kind of people are going to come down on the side of culture wars and would be willing to go for a Mormon,” said Richard Mouw, president of Fuller Theological Seminary and a participant in Mormon-evangelical dialogues. “My guess is that just as evangelicals have toned down the rhetoric against Catholics in recent years because of similarities on social-agenda questions, in this case they are going to side with Romney if he comes across as a champion of the evangelical social agenda.” —*Kimberly Winston, Religion News Service*