

Romney speech on faith may assure some, trouble others: Running as an American, not a Mormon

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Mitt Romney says that he's running for president as an American, not as a Mormon, and conceded that if his religious beliefs cost him the Oval Office, then "so be it."

Was it enough to tamp down evangelicals' skepticism about his faith? That may depend on which evangelicals, and where they stand on the broad spectrum of religious conservatism.

Michael Cromartie, an expert on evangelicals at Washington's Ethics and Public Policy Center, said Romney may have succeeded with some evangelicals who are not hard-core fundamentalists. "He was trying to assure them that he was not some sort of Mormon theocrat," Cromartie said.

But Shaun Casey, an assistant professor of Christian ethics at Wesley Theological Seminary in Washington, said Romney may have lost some evangelicals when he admitted that his church has distinct beliefs about Jesus. "I really don't think it does get at kind of the more red-meat specific doctrinal issues that some of those folks in Iowa—and frankly, the Republican Party—are looking for," said Casey, who's working on a book about similar religion dynamics in John F. Kennedy's 1960 campaign.

Furthermore, in using the conservative line that the nation's founders "did not countenance the elimination of religion from the public square," Romney gave some citizens cause for worrying that he will blur the separation of church and state.

In his speech December 6 in College Station, Texas, Romney, the former governor of Massachusetts, steered clear of defending or defining the unique teachings of Mormonism. Instead, he invoked the familiar evangelical refrain that America should follow the actions of the founders by acknowledging God as Creator.

“I will take care to separate the affairs of government from any religion,” Romney said, “but I will not separate us from the God who gave us liberty.”

Barry Lynn, executive director of Americans United for Separation of Church in State, said: “Romney is wrong when he says we are in danger of taking separation too far or at risk of establishing a religion of secularism.” He said that Romney “thinks the Constitution is somehow based on faith and that judges should rule accordingly.”

Both legal expert Brent Walker of the Baptist Joint Committee and evangelical historian Randall Balmer, writing comments for *On Faith*, the blog of *Newsweek* and the *Washington Post*, noted that Romney made no allusion to millions of nonbelievers and their rights. Instead, he emphasized America’s religious diversity: “We do not insist on a single strain of religion—rather, we welcome our nation’s symphony of faith.”

America’s heritage of moral values “is lived in my religion as it is in yours,” Romney said, including the love of neighbor. “I saw my father march with Martin Luther King,” he said, referring to George Romney, a former Michigan governor who ran for the Republican presidential nomination in the civil rights period.

Richard Mouw, president of Fuller Theological Seminary, said the younger Romney’s speech “more than overcame my concerns” as an evangelical. At that same point in the speech, Romney quoted Jesus’ call to compassion: “I was a stranger, and ye took me in; naked, and ye clothed me.” Mouw said his own prayer will be that the “call to welcome ‘the stranger’ will now begin to show up in Romney’s statements about undocumented immigrants.”

Richard Land, a leading spokesperson for the Southern Baptists, thought Romney generally set the right tone by focusing on religious diversity. Land was invited by the campaign to attend the speech at the George Bush Presidential Library.

The subtle language Romney used, Land said, was important. “My church’s beliefs about Christ may not all be the same as those of other faiths,” said Romney.

He said “faiths,” not “denominations,” Land noted. “He’s espousing Jesus Christ as a savior of mankind, but he’s not asserting that he believes in Jesus the way orthodox Christians do,” said Land. “I noticed immediately that he gave this one degree of separation.”

A number of evangelical groups have questioned whether the Mormon religious body can be considered Christian.

Some polling data indicate that many voters still know relatively little about candidates' religious identities.

Prior to the speech, a *Los Angeles Times*/Bloomberg poll showed that Romney ranked last when Republican voters were asked which of the top-tier GOP candidates are "best at saying what they believe, rather than saying what they think the voters want to hear."

Only 8 percent said Romney is best, compared with 18 percent for former New York mayor Rudy Giuliani and 20 percent for Mike Huckabee, a former Arkansas governor. Romney has come under criticism this year for changing his stances on abortion rights and some other issues important to Republicans.

GOP strategist and former Christian Coalition head Ralph Reed wonders how much a candidate's faith really matters at the end of the day. Voters are more interested in shared values than shared theology, he said. *-Religion News Service, other sources*