

Will Romney's religion define his candidacy?

by Charita M. Goshay

In 1960, editorial cartoons showed Pope John XXIII, suitcase in hand, striding toward the White House, the implication being that if John F. Kennedy were elected, the Vatican would influence U.S. policy.

Former Massachusetts Gov. Mitt Romney's presidential candidacy may likely spur Kennedyesque concerns regarding his membership in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints - commonly known as the Mormons.

Though the church has 6 million members in the U.S., few Americans are familiar with the faith founded by Joseph Smith in 1830.

Thomas Sutton, a professor of political science at Baldwin-Wallace College, said Romney wisely is taking steps to alleviate concerns by meeting with evangelical leaders.

"The main thing he's going try to stress are his positions, as well as the Mormon position, on social issues," he said. "As far as he's concerned, he's placing very much, the focus on family, which is first and foremost in Mormon teaching."

MISCONCEPTIONS

"The fact that a large minority of Americans express opposition to voting for a Mormon for president will pose a challenge to the Romney campaign," said John C. Green, director of Akron University's Raymond Bliss Institute of Applied Politics in Akron, Ohio, and a senior fellow of the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life. "The challenge does not appear to be disabling at the moment, however."

Joseph Kelly, chairman of the Department of Religious Studies at John Carroll University, said Romney's faith may well be an obstacle.

"First, even though the Mormon church officially banned polygamy more than a century ago, many people continue to believe that the church secretly believes it is OK and even looks the other way when individual church members practice polygamy," he said.

"This belief has been very persistent, despite all the insistence of the Mormons to the contrary. If the problem comes up, Mr. Romney can emphasize that nothing that the Mormon church teaches goes contrary to American law. His problem may be that the issue will not arise openly so that he can answer it, but that it will just remain unspoken in people's minds and thus work against him."

With a worldwide membership of 12 million, the Church of Jesus Christ is uniquely "American" in that it has no direct ties to a European faith tradition. The first temple was built in Kirtland, Ohio. Early members frequently were persecuted.

In 1844, Smith and his brother Hyrum were arrested in Nauvoo, Ill., charged with treason for destroying a newspaper that criticized the church. The brothers were murdered by vigilantes. Smith's successor, Brigham Young, led the group to Utah, home of the world-famous Mormon Temple.

Sutton said many elected officials have been Mormons, including Romney's own father, who was governor of Michigan. In both cases, father and son, he said, were successful because their faith wasn't an issue. He said Romney's making clear his conservatism on such issues as abortion, morality, ethics, stewardship of resources and people helping themselves by way of the private sector.

"Again, things you see taught in mainstream Mormonism," he said.

WHO DICTATES?

Sutton said Romney could encounter the fear raised in 1960 about religious hierarchy, dictating policy.

"Romney has made it clear that's not the case," he said. "JFK said the same thing, 'I'm not extension of Rome.' It's an easier proposition for Romney because there's no one figurehead, like a pope. There is an elder position, but he's not making a big deal to explain it."

Another possible snag, Sutton said, could be Protestant ultraconservatives and fundamentalists who view Latter-day Saints with suspicion.

"Most of that, in the realm of politics gets buried, I think, because (he's) 'Someone we think will represent our interests in public sphere, who represents our interests,'" he said. "From that perspective, he's making first good moves to inoculate himself from attacks by those leaders. In many ways, that's what JFK did during the primaries."

BIBLE'S ROLE

Kelly said many evangelicals object that Mormons do not find the Bible sufficient for salvation, but insist that the Book of Mormon is also necessary. A second book, "The Pearl of Great Price," details the church's articles of faith. "This is not a legal issue but a purely religious one," he said. "The key question for voters is, should that disqualify Mr. Romney? Catholics, Jews, Muslims, nonreligious people, and mainstream Protestants will not think so. Most Americans believe that religion is a private matter, unless it impacts society in a negative way, and thus, they would be OK with Mr. Romney's faith.

"On the other hand, evangelical Protestants make a sizable proportion of Republican voters, and in some states, make up the majority, so Mr. Romney may have trouble in the primaries."

NEUTRALITY

Church of Jesus Christ spokeswoman Paula Wright said the church practices political neutrality, even if a candidate is a member, and referred to a statement on the church's Web site:

"Elected officials who are Latter-day Saints make their own decision and may not necessarily be in agreement with one another or even with a publicly stated Church position. While the church may communicate its views to them, as it may to any other elected officials, it recognizes that these officials must still make their own choices based on their best judgment and with consideration of the constituencies whom they were elected to represent."

"He needs to address the issue of his faith forthrightly and make the case that his faith is acceptable to most Americans," Green said. "Then he needs to get on with the campaign and talk about what he would do as president and why."

THE RELIGION FACTOR

- Al Smith, Catholic; broke ground by being the first Catholic to run for president in 1928.

- John F. Kennedy, Catholic; made history as the first Catholic elected to the White House.

- Joseph Lieberman, Jewish; set precedent in 2000 when Vice President Al Gore selected him as his running mate. Lieberman became the first Jewish person on a ticket of a major political party.

- John Kerry, Catholic; during Kerry's 2004 presidential campaign, Catholic bishops declared that any Catholic who supported abortion rights should not be permitted to receive Holy Communion.

CORE BELIEFS

- Because Latter-day Saints believe that divine apostolic authority was lost from the Earth after the death of the ancient apostles, a restoration of that authority was necessary. Members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints believe that restoration began in the early 1800s with revelations to the young Joseph Smith.

- God is often referred to in the church as "Heavenly Father," because he is the father of all human spirits and they are created in his image. Mormons believe he has a human-like body but is immortal and perfected. Heavenly Father instituted the "plan of salvation," which allows individuals to live in his presence and with their families for eternity.

JESUS CHRIST

As the only perfect man who ever lived, Jesus set the example in his life for all to follow. Because humans fall short, Christ's atoning sacrifice pays the price of sin on condition of individual repentance. His sacrifice also allows all humankind to be resurrected into immortality. He is the savior, and in a future time will be the judge.

HOLY GHOST

Church members believe the Holy Ghost is a personage of spirit. The special mission of the Holy Ghost is to testify of the father and the son, to reveal truth, to comfort and to sanctify. He is a divine guide and teacher.

- Latter-day Saints believe that God still speaks to humankind, that he has called new apostles and prophets and that revelation flows today as it did anciently. Further, many of those revelations have been formally

incorporated into new volumes of scripture.

These include "The Book of Mormon: Another Testament of Jesus Christ," "The Doctrine and Covenants," a collection of revelations to Joseph Smith and subsequent presidents of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, and "The Pearl of Great Price," which includes the writings of Moses and Abraham as well as modern writings of Joseph Smith.

- Latter-day Saint theology embraces what Mormons refer to as the "plan of salvation." The topic covers the premortal state of all mankind, the reasons why God created the world, the nature and purpose of our life here and what future awaits us in the next life.

- The primary purpose of temple work is to "seal" or unite families together, with the expectation that those relationships continue beyond death. The same temple rites can be performed for those who have died.

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