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Romney to give religion speech

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After being on the campaign trail for a year now, Republican Mitt Romney has finally decided to address the issue that the country seems to be most concerned about in his bid to become president of the United States -- his religion.

On Thursday, Romney will give a speech titled "Faith in America," which his campaign said will highlight his views on religious freedoms, an American tradition of religious tolerance and how his membership in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints would affect his potential presidency. Romney's speech may be similar to the one John F. Kennedy gave during his 1960 campaign about his Catholic faith, when he stated, "I am not the Catholic candidate for president. I am the Democratic Party's candidate for president who happens also to be a Catholic."

Romney's faith has been a central issue leading up to January's primary elections, eliciting such questions as "Do you believe every word of the Bible?" in last week's Republican debate. Romney responded that he believes the Bible is the word of God, but that he may interpret it differently from others. Now, it appears Romney will address the issue head on.

"Governor Romney understands that faith is an important issue to many Americans, and he personally feels this moment is the right moment for him to share his views with the nation," campaign spokesman Kevin Madden said.

With Romney in the spotlight, the LDS Church has attempted to clear up misconceptions about its practices and beliefs, as evidenced by an October online news conference in which it allowed reporters to ask about anything. The LDS Church doesn't endorse presidential candidates and rarely takes a political stance. But church spokesman Rob Howell said the church will be paying attention to Romney's speech.

"We don't feel it appropriate to make any comment before Governor Romney gives his speech on Thursday, but will be watching with interest," Howell said.

Without question, so will the rest of the nation.

The Big Speech

Romney's religion has been an issue for most of his political career, starting in 1994 with his run for U.S. Senate in Massachusetts. He lost to Sen. Ted Kennedy, D-Mass., but said in a Republican primary debate that year that he'd had enough of the religion talk.

"I'm sick of it," Romney said after his opponent brought up the fact that he had been a Mormon bishop. "I'm tired of the Mormon stuff. I'm not running for cardinal, I'm running for the Senate of the United States."

His remarks echo Kennedy's, and many analysts suspect Thursday's speech will be similar to the one Kennedy gave.

In what was to be one of the closest presidential contests in U.S. history, John F. Kennedy faced many

questions about his Catholic faith. The country had never had a Catholic president, and many were worried that if Kennedy were elected, he would take his marching orders from the pope.

So in September 1960, Kennedy gave a speech to the Greater Houston Ministerial Association declaring among other things "no Catholic prelate would tell the president how to act" and "where Catholics, Protestants and Jews, at both the lay and pastoral level, will refrain from those attitudes of disdain and division which have so often marred their works in the past, and promote instead the American ideal of brotherhood."

The speech was so forceful that it essentially put to rest the Catholic issue. But its legacy could also make it difficult for Romney on Thursday to produce a lasting impact.

"Kennedy gave a legitimately great speech. It's really like being asked to give the second Gettysburg address," said Kirk Jowers of the Hinckley Institute of Politics at the University of Utah.

What he says

The speeches will likely have many similarities, but there will be a difference in emphasis, say political experts.

Instead of forcefully denouncing any outside influence from LDS Church leadership, Romney needs to emphasize similar values and downplay specific theology.

"I don't think people are afraid of the church dictating to Romney," said Quin Monson, assistant director for Brigham Young University's Center for the Study of Elections and Democracy.

U.S. Rep. Chris Cannon, R-Utah, says the LDS Church rarely makes its wishes known when it comes to politics.

"The only two instances I can recall that the church directly made their views known to me were on church worker visas and zoning for faith institutions. On these issues, many denominations made their views clear as well and it was not exclusively a Mormon Church issue," Cannon said.

Instead he needs to differentiate between values and theology -- similar values are important and that the theology doesn't matter.

"He needs to say 'You don't need to be afraid of me. You don't need to be afraid of that, because it's not that important,'" Monson said.

It's a fine line, to be sure.

"My sense is that they've been working on threading that needle for months," Monson said.

Church members who plan to vote for Romney are glad he's giving the speech. Bruce Chapman, an Orem retiree who donated to Romney's campaign, said he's got his work cut out for him.

"That's really the crux of the problem in giving a speech," Chapman said. "It's getting into other people's minds and finding out what they need to hear to have a more favorable view."

Chapman said Romney is a good representative of the LDS faith, and suspects he'll hit the issue straight on.

"He should address the Christianity of Mormonism," Chapman said. "I think it would be better for him to stay with the good things that the LDS faith teaches that stress the good in all humanity."

What he gains

The short term gains include stunting a surging Republican Mike Huckabee in early primaries like Iowa and New Hampshire. Huckabee, the former Arkansas governor and preacher, is up big in the polls as Republican Rudy Giuliani sags after recent reports that he hid expenses in various city departments while mayor of New York, related to visits to his then-mistress, now wife Judith Nathan.

Romney's campaign has appeared to be if not listless, then at least less focused. Thursday could change that.

"It's no longer Romney's drifting, it's Romney making this bold speech," Monson said.

Jowers, of the Hinckley Institute, said it's unlikely that Romney is doing the speech in reaction to Huckabee. Instead, the campaign was probably waiting for a perfect moment that never materialized and instead has to give the speech at the last possible moment before the primaries.

"He's said all of these things in various context, but now everyone is listening."

Not only are they listening, but Ralph Yarrow, an LDS member who founded Thinkatomic, Inc., said they're demanding it.

"They're counting on it," Yarrow said. "On one side, to criticize and use to their advantage. And on the other side, to promote his views and also take advantage of it. Religion is important in my life and many American lives, and there's a large group in this country that wants somebody who cares about religion."

Yarrow said he wants a president who represents the whole country, not just Mormons, and he hopes this speech is an opportunity to show that his values are in line with Christian values in the U.S.

"I hope he's not apologetic in any way," Yarrow said. "His religion is of great value and worth to him, and clearly to the people in the United States who feel there is accountability to a higher force."

Whatever help the speech gives him in the primaries, Romney could also put to rest religious attacks, especially in the news, that have dogged his campaign since the beginning.

It could also neutralize anonymous attacks, the sort of unsigned signs and fliers that abound in mudslinging races across the country, including Utah County.

"Don't think for a minute that it's not going to happen when the stakes are higher, way higher in an Iowa caucus," Monson said.

Cannon says the speech may not come down to a huge success or dismal failure but somewhere in between.

"Like it or not, voters choose a candidate for many reasons and if this speech can break down barriers for some voters, I think it will benefit Governor Romney," he said.

Romney speech, "Faith in America" 8:30 a.m. Thursday George Bush Presidential Library Center at Texas A&M University Watch a live webstream of the address at <http://www.georgebushfoundation.org/>

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