



## Romney seeks to calm fears over his faith

By Andrew Ward in Washington

**Financial Times**

updated 2:42 a.m. MT, Thurs., Dec. 6, 2007

It was a question that dogged John F. Kennedy throughout his presidential campaign: would the US elect a Catholic as commander-in-chief? He confronted the issue with a speech promising never to take orders from the Vatican.

Nearly half a century later, Mitt Romney, the Republican White House hopeful, will on Thursday address similar doubts about his bid to become the first Mormon president in a speech about faith and religious tolerance.

The former governor of Massachusetts has agonised over how to tackle concerns about Mormonism, which some Christians view as a cult. Many of his advisers have cautioned against a Kennedy-style speech, arguing there is little to be gained from drawing attention to his faith.

But pressure to confront the issue has mounted as Mr Romney faces an increasingly fierce battle to win next month's Iowa caucuses, which mark the start of the presidential nomination process.

Victory in Iowa is crucial if Mr Romney is to have any chance of defeating Rudy Giuliani, the former New York mayor, who leads the Republican race nationally. For most of this year Mr Romney has held a commanding poll lead in Iowa, helped by heavy campaign spending in the state.

Christian conservatives appeared willing to overlook doubts about his faith on the basis that he offered the most viable alternative to Mr Giuliani, whose socially liberal views alarm many on the religious right.

Recent polls, however, have shown Mr Romney overtaken in Iowa by Mike Huckabee, the former Arkansas governor and surprise late contender for the Republican nomination. As an ordained Baptist minister, Mr Huckabee has won support among the 40 per cent of Iowa Republican caucus-goers who consider themselves evangelical.

Mr Huckabee has carefully dodged questions about his views on Mormonism. But his latest campaign advertisement, which describes him as a "Christian leader", delivers an implicit message that he is the most authentic Christian in the race.

It is unclear to what extent Mormonism is to blame for Mr Romney's decline. But national opinion polls indicate that suspicion of his faith runs deep.

A survey by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life in February found 30 per cent of respondents would be less likely to back a Mormon for president.

Misgivings about Mormonism date back to its founding in 1830 by Joseph Smith, a self-declared prophet who claimed to have discovered a sacred text in upstate New York. Mr Smith was later killed by a mob and his followers fled to Utah, where 60 per cent of US Mormons live.

The religion remains notorious for its association with polygamy even though the Church of the Latter Day Saints (LDS), the main Mormon church, banned the practice in 1904.

Kellyanne Conway, a Republican pollster, says Mr Romney faces a bigger challenge than Mr Kennedy did because Mormonism is much less well understood than Catholicism. LDS church members represent less than 2 per cent of the electorate.

Kirk Jowers, political scientist at the University of Utah, says Mr Romney must convince voters the LDS church will not have undue influence in a Romney administration, just as Mr Kennedy offered similar assurances about the Vatican. But he believes the main purpose of the speech should be to acknowledge differences between Mormonism and other Christian faiths, while stressing their shared values.

*Copyright The Financial Times Ltd. All rights reserved.*

URL: <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/22116987/>

[MSN Privacy](#) . [Legal](#)

© 2007 MSNBC.com