

Friday, December 07, 2007

'Symphony of faith': Mormon candidate hails religious liberty

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Joe Pyrah - DAILY HERALD

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Dismissing single strains of religion, presidential hopeful Mitt Romney said Thursday that the nation is a "symphony of faith."

Leaning heavily on the nation's history, Romney, a Republican, gave a speech pegged as his "JFK" moment where he could talk about his membership in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints but distance himself from any church control.

Romney did invoke President Kennedy's speech of nearly 50 years ago in which Kennedy proclaimed famously "I am not the Catholic candidate for president. I am the Democratic Party's candidate for president who happens also to be a Catholic."

In his 25-minute speech at the George Bush Presidential Library in College Station, Texas, Romney declared his independence from the influence of the leadership of his church or any other church.

"Their authority is theirs, within the province of church affairs, and it ends where the affairs of the nation begin," he said.

Strangely absent from the speech was the actual name of his church or even its popular moniker "Mormon," which appeared only once. For comparison, he mentioned Catholics three times and Islam or Muslim four times.

"It was puzzling that he didn't take the opportunity to include the official name of the church in his speech," said Brian Birch, director of the Religious Studies Program at Utah Valley State College. "The national media continues to use the terms 'Mormon Church' and 'Mormon religion.' "

Romney also didn't delve into dogma, instead invoking Article VI of the Constitution, which states that "no religious test shall ever be required as a qualification to any office or public trust under the United States."

Romney's religion has repeatedly come under fire during the campaign, especially as he looks for the support of conservative Christians in the South. While more than half of the country believes Mormons are Christian, only 40 percent of evangelicals believe the same, according to the Pew Research Center. It's that GOP base that Romney has been trying to appeal to almost since he announced his candidacy.

Even as fellow frontrunner Rudy Giuliani falters amid scandal, Romney has failed to pick up momentum, instead watching former Arkansas governor and Baptist preacher Mike Huckabee surge from the back.

That Romney had to give a speech at all is a testament to the peculiarity of the LDS Church. Despite its 13 million members, the church's practices are still a mystery to many.

"Given its size, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is still a largely unknown quantity and the fragments presented in media all too often solidify negative impressions," Birch said. "Though Mormonism will continue to remain peculiar, I think the level of suspicion and intolerance will subside over time."

If voters were looking for Mormonism 101 on Thursday, they went away disappointed, though Romney did

hold fast to his beliefs: "There are some for whom these commitments are not enough. They would prefer it if I would simply distance myself from my religion, say that it is more a tradition than my personal conviction, or disavow one or another of its precepts. That I will not do. I believe in my Mormon faith and I endeavor to live by it. My faith is the faith of my fathers -- I will be true to them and to my beliefs."

It was exactly the right approach, Birch said.

"He communicated only as much as was necessary to assure conservative evangelical voters that he shared their basic Christian beliefs and social values," Birch said. "I think going into theological specifics in this speech would have distracted the public's attention away from the real issue, which is the extent to which his allegiance to his church would impact his positions on public policy."

Like Kennedy before him, Romney ran down a laundry list of other faiths, praising them for specific characteristics, including the "profound ceremony" of the Catholic mass, the "ancient traditions" of the Jews and the "commitment to frequent prayer" of the Muslims.

"We do not insist on a single strain of religion -- rather, we welcome our nation's symphony of faith," he said.

Islam did not get a free pass however, as Romney repeatedly said that extreme elements of that religion are the greatest danger the United States faces today.

"These radical Islamists do their preaching not by reason or example, but in the coercion of minds and the shedding of blood," he said.

Supporters and experts alike were impressed by the speech, but its impact is unknown, especially in the media.

"It definitely does not put the whole religion issue to rest," said Kirk Jowers, director of the Hinckley Institute of Politics at the University of Utah.

About 150 students gathered at the Institute to watch the speech, he said, and most reaction there was positive. Outside Utah, the speech will likely appeal to a narrow group of voters, at least in the primaries.

"Anyone who liked Romney as a candidate but was nervous to vote for him because of his faith ... I think this speech would give them every excuse to back Romney," said Jowers, who has donated the maximum allowed amount to the Romney campaign.

One-word impressions of the Mormon religion (Not a percentage but number of responses from 1,461 people) 75 Polygamy/bigamy 74 Family/family values 57 Cult 40 Different 34 Dedicated 32 Devout/devoted 31 Good 27 Strict 25 Faith/faithful Are Mormons Christian? Yes No Don't know 52 31 17 America's favorable opinion of ... 76 Jews 76 Catholics 60 Evangelical Christians 53 Mormons 53 Muslim Americans 43 Muslims 35 Atheists Willingness to vote for a candidate if he/she is Mormon 05 More likely 25 Less likely 66 No difference 04 Don't know Source: Pew Research Center
What they're saying: U.S. Rep. Chris Cannon, R-Utah "Governor Romney clearly articulated basic American truths. He reminded us all of our common history, moral heritage and the fact that our rights come from God. He clearly and passionately defended freedom of religion in its original intent. This speech should be welcomed by all people of faith in America and I believe it will be. Mitt Romney defined what unites us as Christians and as Americans. Republicans, Democrats and Independents of faith found one of their own in Mitt Romney today. "Among those many Americans who are unfamiliar with the Mormon faith, there is great curiosity. If the speech encourages those with questions to more thoroughly investigate Mormonism, then that is a good thing. If the speech today encourages people of all religions to reflect upon

their own faith, and thoughtfully seek to better live it, then that is also a good thing. As the founders knew, the inclusion of faith in American life is necessary to maintain our freedoms and if the speech reminded Americans of that truth, then he has accomplished a great thing." U.S. Sen. Orrin Hatch, R-Utah "The Founding Fathers built this great nation on the very simple principle that church and state should be separate. The U.S. Constitution explicitly states in Article VI, section 3 '...no religious test shall ever be required as a qualification to any office or public trust under the United States.' That should be the case with any candidate. Mitt Romney's religious beliefs would not interfere with his ability to lead the country. On the contrary, his religious beliefs demand him to be fair, decent and kind to all people."

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