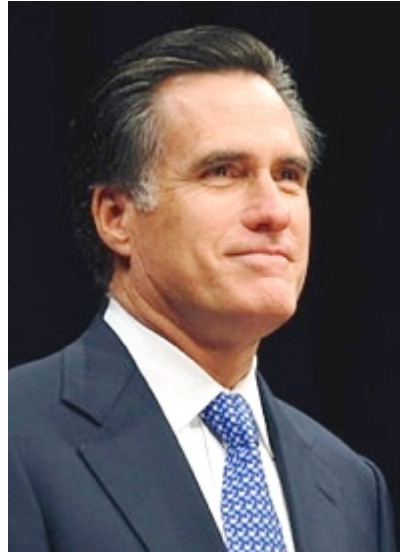




Should Evangelicals Vote for a Mormon?

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS) has shot back a pointed response to an article by an evangelical Christian columnist who declared that evangelicals should not vote for Mitt Romney because he is a Mormon. In an open letter to Warren Cole Smith, associate publisher for WORLD magazine, the LDS church's public affairs head Michael Otterson told Smith that he was "struggling just a tad with your logic that the very fact of being a Mormon disqualifies a person from high public office." Such a revelation, Otterson said, "would be news to Senator Orrin Hatch, who has served his country and constituents for 34 years," as well as to Senator Harry Reid, "the Senate Majority Leader — one of the most powerful positions in government."



The motivation for Otterson's letter was Smith's column, posted on Patheos.com, in which the evangelical editor explained why, as a Christian, he would not be able to vote for Romney. Smith conceded that the prevailing wisdom held that Romney is a "top tier" Republican presidential contender whose Mormon faith should not play a factor in his candidacy. "Romney's Mormonism is purportedly like Kennedy's Catholicism," Smith wrote: "interesting, perhaps troubling from a theological point of view, but irrelevant to his governing philosophy."

Smith, however, challenged the "prevailing wisdom," predicting that Romney's "religious worldview will be vital to his governing philosophy, and will ultimately be the issue that undermines his candidacy." Recalling that Romney counted "conservative icon" Paul Weyrich, Fundamentalist Baptist university president Bob Jones III, and reformed theologian Dr. Wayne Grudem among his supporters in the 2008 presidential run-up, Smith noted that Christian conservatives continue to be favorably inclined toward giving Romney a pass on his religion, arguing that the LDS church's "social teachings on abortion, same-sex marriage, and a range of other issues are very similar" to those generally espoused in evangelical circles. Mormons and evangelicals are, as Christian social commentator Francis Schaeffer might have termed them, "co-belligerents" against the rising tide of liberal evil.

Poppycock! admonished Mr. Smith in his epistle to evangelical voters. As Weyrich would come to understand (and repent of shortly before his death, claimed Smith), "you can't have it 'both ways' when it comes to Romney's faith. You can't say that his religious beliefs don't matter, but his 'values' do." Appealing to something called a "Christian worldview" (apparently similar to, but not the same as, Scripture), Smith argued that behavior "flows" from values and charged that Mormon values are in a constant state of flux because of their belief in "continuing revelation." Thus, noted Smith, the Mormon church can change its views on such issues as polygamy and race, officially forbidding the multiple



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marriages it once allowed, and welcoming the racial minorities it once barred (here Smith conveniently ignores the fact that his own southern Christian forbears once did the same, only without the benefit of a synthesized doctrine to justify their practice of racial exclusion).

Charging that LDS social teaching is “unreliable and subject to alteration” and that the “boat of Mormonism is not tied to the anchor of either historical Christianity or even commonly accepted historical facts,” Smith wondered how long it would be in the presidential campaign before Romney would be called upon to answer some tough questions on a few of the outré beliefs of his denomination.

Perhaps most troubling, Smith wrote, is that electing a Mormon to the ‘bully pulpit’ of the presidency “would be a source of pride and a shot of adrenaline for the LDS church,” serving to “normalize the false teachings of Mormonism the world over” as well as providing “an opening to Mormon missionaries around the world, who could start every conversation: ‘Let me tell you about the American president.’” Here Smith reveals the very crux of his beef with a Romney Administration: “To elect a Mormon President is to advance the cause of the Mormon Church.”

In his controlled response to Smith, LDS church spokesman Michael Otterson studiously avoided the issue of Romney as a candidate, choosing to focus on what he insisted was the real issue Smith had unintentionally raised — which boiled down to “how differently you and I understand what it is to be an American.”

Conceding that he really didn’t know “how good or bad any of the likely candidates — Latter-day Saint or otherwise — might be as president of the United States,” Otterson predicted that whoever is eventually elected in 2012 would ultimately be judged in history not by “where they worshipped on the Sabbath,” but by their “grasp of economics, of foreign policy, of education and health care, of their skills as commander in chief,” as well as by how “they responded to crises” and “their core values and ability to unite and rally the American people.”

Addressing Smith’s caricature of LDS beliefs as a kind of schizophrenic theology, Otterson claimed that “continuing revelation” merely means that, first of all, Mormons “look for answers to personal prayers,” and secondly, that LDS “church leaders receive inspiration and guidance to lead the church worldwide. It doesn’t mean, as you assert, that we ‘believe one thing today and another thing tomorrow.’ ”

Turning to Smith’s fear that the election of a Mormon President would amount to a “tacit endorsement” of the LDS church, Otterson reflected that most people “never thought of the election of John Kennedy as an endorsement for Catholicism, or that Richard Nixon’s election ‘legitimized’ Quakers (as if these groups needed legitimation). I think most Americans saw their religious affiliations as incidental to their policies and platforms.”

Suggesting that the motive behind Smith’s article might be to “effectively marginalize Mormons and make it impossible for them to run for office,” Otterson charged his editorial opponent with holding a position that is “unreasonable, un-Christian, and untrue to American ideals.”

Otterson concluded his respectfully penned response to Smith’s discourse by informing him that “despite my clear disagreement with some of your theology, I would have absolutely no problem voting for an evangelical who was in every way qualified to be president of the United States.”

In the end, neither Smith’s austere (and loveless) theo-political treatise nor Otterson’s subtle LDS branding effort is likely to greatly influence many conservative voters, who, like the population at large, tend to minimize relevant issues and gravitate toward the candidate who has garnered the most popularity in their particular camp.



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As it happens, however, even while Mitt Romney appears to be, for the moment at least, the Republican candidate of choice, a recent national survey conducted by [Quinnipiac University Polling Institute](#) found that “American voters remain somewhat leery of a Mormon president, saying only a Muslim or atheist presidential candidate would make them more uncomfortable,” reported the [Wall Street Journal](#).

The *Journal* predicted that Romney and Utah Governor Jon Huntsman Jr., a fellow Mormon who is also seriously considering a presidential run, may well face a wall of awkward queries concerning their unconventional religious beliefs. Already Romney has been forced to deflect such questions, as he attempted when he recently insisted to CNN’s Piers Morgan that “I’m not a spokesman for my church, and one thing I’m not going to do in running for President is become a spokesman for my church or apply a religious test that is simply forbidden by the Constitution. I’m not going there.”

Nonetheless, as Smith warned in his column, the issue of his Mormon faith will inevitably dog Romney as the campaign heats up in the coming months. According to the Quinnipiac poll, while 83 percent of voters said they would be comfortable with a Catholic presidential candidate, 80 would be okay with a Jewish candidate, and some two-thirds would tolerate an evangelical Christian candidate, only 60 percent of voters would be comfortable with a Mormon presidential candidate, a statistic that could prove crucial in a tight race for the White House.

While a direct challenge to Romney’s faith is unlikely in the presidential campaign, the Quinnipiac University Polling Institute’s Peter Brown said that the media can be expected to make it an issue with regards to how Romney’s religious background may inform his White House policies. “This is obviously a question that’s going to be dealt with,” he said.



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