

Imperfect fit

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When Mitt Romney's religion is mentioned these days, we often hear that Mormons and evangelicals, despite theological differences, are on the same page politically. But while Mormon voters are among the country's most conservative, there are key issues on which they don't line up neatly with the religious right.

By Drake Bennett | December 31, 2006

DESPITE ALL THE attention Mitt Romney's religion has received, when he formally launches his campaign for president sometime in the next few weeks -- as he is widely expected to do -- he won't be the first Mormon to run for the office. Just six years ago, Senator Orrin Hatch of Utah made a short-lived presidential bid, and in 1967 Romney's own father, George, then governor of Michigan, was the early front-runner for the Republican nomination (until, notoriously, he blamed a "brainwashing" for his earlier support for the Vietnam War).

In fact, the phenomenon of Mormons running for president is almost as old as the religion itself. Joseph Smith, founding prophet of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS), as the church is officially known, himself ran in 1844. Smith never had much of a chance, and he was shot to death by an Illinois mob that June, in one of the many instances in which hostility toward the insular church and its beliefs bubbled over into violence.

Not only was there the Mormon practice of polygamy (formally renounced by the church in 1890), but Smith espoused a political and social worldview regarded as dangerously radical by many who had come into contact with the growing Mormon settlements. Smith was an abolitionist, for one thing; and he argued for the communal ownership of property. According to Richard Bushman, an emeritus professor of history at Columbia University and a biographer of Smith, Mormons identified strongly with the revolutionaries who would roil Europe in 1848.

Today many Americans remain deeply skeptical about the LDS church. Recent polls have found that around 40 percent of Americans say they would not vote for a Mormon for president -- though nearly as many said they would have reservations voting for a Catholic in 1960, the year John F. Kennedy won the White House. Many conservative Christians, especially Catholics and evangelicals, still consider Mormons -- who follow non-biblical works of scripture, teach that God has a physical body, and believe in the possibility of direct revelation and that people can evolve toward godhood -- to be members of a cult.

But the left-wing radicalism once associated with the religion has disappeared. Mormons today are reliable Republicans. According to Joseph Quin Monson, a political scientist at LDS-owned Brigham Young University, they are "almost as monolithically Republican as African-Americans are Democratic." They tend on most major issues to be culturally and economically conservative, and in the past few presidential elections 80 to 90 percent of Mormons have voted for the Republican candidate.

All in all, in the words of Mark Noll, a historian of American Christianity at the University of Notre Dame, "politically considered, white evangelicals and Mormons look very similar."

It is this alignment that Romney has tried to exploit in courting his party's vital conservative Christian bloc. He has emphasized his opposition to embryonic stem-cell research, and sought to distance himself from earlier statements that suggested moderate views on same-sex marriage and abortion. According to Gregory Rodriguez, a political analyst at the New America Foundation, Romney has even called himself an "evangelical Mormon."

Indeed, when Romney and others talk about his Mormonism in the context of the coming campaign, the assumption is that, despite the theological differences between LDS and evangelicals, politically the two groups are on the same page.

But while few dispute the social conservatism of the LDS church and its members, it is also true that on some key issues they don't fall neatly into line with the religious right's priorities.

To be sure, Mormons and conservative Christians, both Catholic and evangelical, are on the same side of two of the bitterest culture-war battles being fought today, over gay marriage and abortion. On others, though -- stem-cell research, the teaching of evolution in schools, public funding for religion, and end-of-life care -- the LDS church is harder to pin down. In part this is due to the church's unique theology, but it may also derive from Mormonism's early

history as a marginal sect suspicious of (and suspected by) the US government. Mormons today are among the nation's most patriotic groups, but many retain a sharp sense of their minority status.

Romney himself has been quick to point out that he is not running as a representative of his religion. And like John F. Kennedy, he has demonstrated over the years a certain independence from his church. And yet, lost in the discussion of Romney and Mormonism is that, unlike Kennedy, Romney's stances on key issues dear to the religious right may actually make him more conservative than his own church.

It was in the 1970s that the LDS church as an institution moved definitively into the political arena. As with white evangelicals, the galvanizing issues were the Equal Rights Amendment and *Roe v. Wade*, both of which the church saw as a threat to the nuclear family. Today, similar concerns animate the church's vocal opposition to same-sex marriage.

The church remains pro-life. But the official Mormon position on abortion differs in one key respect from that of the Catholic Church and many Protestant denominations: to the LDS church, abortion is not murder. The reason for this is that (again, unlike many Christian denominations) Mormon theology has no clear position on when a body acquires a soul -- when, in effect, earthly life begins. "Since they don't define when the soul enters the body, they can't call abortion murder, they simply say it's 'like unto it,'" says Richard Sherlock, a professor of philosophy and expert on Mormon ethics at Utah State University.

As a result, the LDS church takes a more flexible approach to abortion than many other churches, opposing what it calls "elective abortion for personal or social convenience," but allowing abortions in the case of rape, incest, fatal fetal deformities, or when the health of the mother is at risk. Just as significantly, it does not throw its weight behind legislative efforts to limit or outlaw abortion. In short, neither the Mitt Romney who ran for Senate in 1994 vowing to keep abortion safe and legal, nor the more recent "firmly pro-life" Romney, would be in the wrong according to the teachings of his church.

On abortion, such theological distinctions may not make much difference to many Mormons, the overwhelming majority of whom identify themselves as pro-life. But on the question of stem-cell research, which has become a major issue for the conservative Republican base, the official ambiguity on when life begins has had far more tangible political effects.

The LDS church has no official position on stem-cell research, but according to Dan Jones, a leading Utah pollster, more than 60 percent of the Mormons in the state, who tend to be among the country's most conservative, support it. Orrin Hatch is one of Congress's leading proponents of federal stem-cell funding, and his four Mormon colleagues in the Senate (Senator Harry Reid, a Democrat, and Senators Michael Crapo, Gordon Smith, and Robert Bennett, all Republicans) have taken similar positions.

In public appearances, Romney has credited his thinking about the moral consequences of stem-cell research with having led him toward a more conservative position on other reproductive issues, like abortion and emergency contraception. And while this shift may have made him a more viable national Republican candidate, on the stem-cell issue at least, it has placed him outside the mainstream of his own faith.

If this divergence between conservative Christians and Mormons springs from theology, another originates in the church's early history at the margins of American society. For Mormons, says Armand Mauss, a sociologist at the Claremont Graduate University School of Religion specializing in Mormon political and social attitudes, "there is an acute awareness of their own history as a persecuted people," a tendency "to lean on the side of freedom of expression for all different kinds of groups."

This history has translated into a respect for the constitutional separation of church and state not always popular on the religious right. John Green, a senior fellow in religion and American politics at the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, describes Mormons as having "a special sensitivity to relations with the government." While evangelical leaders like Pat Robertson and James Dobson have publicly supported the Bush administration's funding for faith-based programs, for example, the LDS church has refused to participate in the initiative out of a fear that with government money comes government control (several conservative Christian organizations, including the Southern Baptist Convention, have taken similar positions).

For the most part -- and despite evidence, recently reported by the Globe, that Romney aides had talked to LDS church leaders about creating a network of Mormon supporters for the upcoming campaign -- the church is conscientious about keeping partisan politics separate from religious matters. Aside from what it sees as issues relating to "how children are raised," says Jan Shippo, widely considered the leading non-Mormon historian of the religion, the church's leaders tend to shy away from taking political action (doing so would, of course, also endanger

the church's nonprofit status). Polling done by BYU's Quin Monson and Notre Dame political scientist David Campbell found that, between Catholics, Southern Baptists, and Mormons, as the two write, "Mormons are by far the least likely to receive political cues at church."

Because of this insistence on separate religious and political spheres, Mormons appear less likely to wade into other culture-war debates, such as the teaching of evolution. Duane Jeffery, a BYU professor of biology and a leading opponent of teaching intelligent design in science classes, says the issue hasn't had the same resonance for Mormons as it has for many evangelical communities -- not because the LDS church is full of diehard Darwinists (the church has no official policy on the subject) but because Mormon parents, by and large, are satisfied that their children are getting their religious instruction through the often daily seminary classes the church runs for them. "In general," he says, "most of them feel that there's not much reason to get politically involved" over the issue.

On the issue of school prayer, which conservative evangelicals overwhelmingly favor, Mormons are divided. In Utah, according to the pollster Dan Jones, most Mormons support it. Polling numbers outside of Utah are harder to come by, but some political scientists and sociologists of the church argue that Mormons living elsewhere see school prayer as a threat. Two-thirds of American Mormons live outside the Mormon strongholds of the Western mountain states, and as BYU political scientist Richard Davis puts it, "There's a little more uneasiness about it because of the realization that they're a minority." The 2000 Supreme Court case *Santa Fe Independent School District v. Doe*, which outlawed student-led prayers before football games, was brought by a Mormon family in Texas.

That is not to say that the church refrains from telling its members what sort of life to lead (devout Mormons cannot drink alcohol, smoke, or have caffeine), but it often allows them the freedom to make decisions that other conservative churches would balk at. During the heated debate over the fate of Terri Schiavo, for example, the Mormon church reiterated its position that, "Members should not feel obligated to extend mortal life by means that are unreasonable."

"There are fewer fixed dos and don'ts" for Mormons, says Sherlock. On end-of-life issues, he says, "the Mormon Church says, 'Think about it, pray about it, and get the best answer you can.'"

It's this idea that Romney himself seemed to refer to in a 1994 interview with the Boston-based gay and lesbian newspaper *Bay Windows*, in which he rooted what was then his strong support for gay rights in his religion. Drawing on the Mormon concept of "free agency" -- the idea that, despite God's foreknowledge of what we will do, we are still free to choose our actions -- he made a political argument about the value of tolerance. "Our society should allow people to make their own choices and live by their own beliefs," he argued.

Since those comments resurfaced a few weeks ago, Romney has been pressed to reconcile them with his now strident opposition to same-sex marriage. On that issue, Romney's newly assertive conservatism places him in step with his church. On others, though, he seems more a conservative evangelical than a Mormon.

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