

Most Mormons Applaud Romney's Speech, Delivery

By Peggy Fletcher Stack
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Mormons almost universally applauded Mitt Romney's speech on Thursday. They were relieved, excited, even jubilant about Romney's performance.

Within minutes of the speech's conclusion, members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints were burning up the "bloggernacle," or online Mormon community, praising Romney and the speech even as they dissected its details.

"I was absolutely thrilled," gushed LDS historian Richard Bushman, who is doing research at the Huntington Library in Los Angeles. "Mitt distinguished himself with this speech. I thought he would say more about his Mormonism, but he wisely didn't."

Bushman thought Romney "definitely and emphatically" laid to rest the idea that he would take orders from LDS leaders in Salt Lake City. (To reemphasize that point, the LDS Church re-posted on lds.org its stance on political neutrality.)

He appreciated Romney's inclusion of Brigham Young among his short list of people persecuted for their faith, but he didn't resort to "moaning and groaning and asking for pity."

Many national and local Evangelicals were likewise impressed.

In a news release, James Dobson of Focus on the Family called the speech, "a magnificent reminder of the role religious faith must play in government and public policy."

It was "moving," said Richard Mouw, president of Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, Calif. "It exceeded my expectations. He connected in careful and inspiring ways with the American political tradition."

However much Mouw might disagree with Romney's politics, the Protestant leader thought Romney "showed himself to be an important moral leader in American life. His statement ought to be studied for its wisdom on religious freedom and religious pluralism."

The speech did move the the American religious conversation forward, said the Rev. Gregory Johnson, who leads Standing Together, a Salt Lake City-based group of Evangelical clergy. "He reminded us of our responsibility as Mormons, Muslims, Evangelicals, Catholics and Atheists to work together to make this country the best it can be."

Yet it won't satisfy those who wanted to hear Romney explain his Mormon beliefs, said Johnson, who attended the speech with Robert Millet, a Brigham Young

University religion professor. "I don't think it will appease Evangelical Christians who think Mormonism is a cult. Those prejudices are pretty strong and their strong negative opinions often prevail." Another group that was excluded from Romney's symphony of faith - non-believers.

The belief that all people are literally God's children -- Mormon, Catholic, Jew, Muslim - represents "the best of Mormon belief," said Ronan James Head, a British Mormon, via email. "The only person missing from Romney's America seems to be the atheists. Obviously Romney was trying to bridge the Evangelical-Mormon gap, but I think the biggest ideological fault line in America exists between conservative believers and everyone else, including those of liberal or no belief." Head also wished Romney would "tone down the 'godless' Europe rhetoric."

Though he would love to vote for a fellow Mormon, Bushman has winced at some of Romney's stances, such as his hostility towards undocumented immigrants. Romney's unwillingness to limit harsh interrogation techniques of terrorism suspects, which have included waterboarding, "breaks my heart," Bushman said.

But his performance Thursday renewed the historian's faith in the Romney.

"This is a man of such intellectual power and depth," Bushman said. "If he could address the problems of this country with that same kind of wisdom and rhetoric, he would be a magnificent president."

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