

A New Opportunity for Mormonism?

Richard J. Mouw, a prominent evangelical, offers a 'friendly suggestion' to Mormons about explaining their faith.

By Richard J. Mouw

There is some political buzz again about Mitt Romney, who is reportedly on John McCain's list as a potential running mate. If McCain chooses him we can be sure that Mormonism will once again be in the news. When Romney was a contender in the recent primaries, media commentators were discussing Mormon theology with abandon. And much of this worked against Romney's candidacy. Not that his failure to connect with the American public was all about religion. But an anti-Mormon bias was certainly a factor. There is a conviction at work that you just can't trust Mormons: Latter-day Saints don't say what they really believe, and they manipulate us to achieve their goals. Some of this had to be in play when people accused Mitt of saying whatever he had to say in order to get elected.

All of this must have been frustrating for the Latter-day Saints leadership in Salt Lake City. They simply had to let a lot of confusion about Mormon teachings go uncorrected. It would have been counterproductive to give the impression that they were serving as Romney's theological managers.

Is the net effect of all this recent attention a setback for the Latter-day Saints? It doesn't have to be. In the past, the agenda for evaluating Mormon belief and practice has been controlled largely by an evangelical "counter-cult" movement that has made attacking Mormonism into an industry. The Romney phenomenon at least succeeded in broadening the public conversation about Mormonism. The LDS leadership can

see this as an opportunity for a creative initiative.

As an evangelical who has publicly called for a friendlier dialogue with Mormons, I know something about a deep anti-Mormon bias in American life. Speaking to a large gathering a few years ago in Salt Lake City's Mormon Tabernacle, I apologized to the Mormons in the crowd for the ways in which we evangelicals have often told them what they believe without first asking them what they believe. I still get hate mail and attacks on "Christian radio" for what is seen as my compromise with the Devil. It doesn't matter that I have always gone out of my way to make it clear that I have serious disagreements with Mormonism in matters of eternal importance. Many evangelicals simply refuse to acknowledge any problem with the way we have portrayed Mormon teachings.

Some of us in the evangelical academic community have engaged in the careful study of Mormon thought, making sure to check out our interpretations with LDS scholars. While we do have very serious disagreements with Mormonism on a number of major theological issues, we see the need honestly to engage the Mormon worldview on its own terms, without the distortions often perpetuated by many of our evangelical fellow travelers. That Mormonism cannot be dismissed as simply one more "cult" should be obvious. For one thing, Brigham Young University has come to be a center of important scholarship, including these days in philosophy and theology. Those of us who have engaged in intensive dialogue with Mormon intellectuals over the past decade or so can testify to this fact.

Mitt Romney's faith-and-politics speech recalled for many John Kennedy's famous Houston address. The comparison is an obvious one. It wasn't clear in 1960 how a Catholic could endorse democratic pluralism, and folks have similar worries today about Mormonism. The fact is, however, that Kennedy's speech did not clarify the basic issues—he simply reassured the citizenry that his private beliefs would not influence his public policies. The real change came with the Second Vatican

Council, called by Pope John XXIII, where the Catholic bishops engaged in an elaborate aggiornamento ("updating") of Catholic thought, addressing among other things the role of Catholicism in present-day democracies.

I don't expect the Mormon leaders to convene an LDS version of Vatican II, replete with open deliberative sessions attended by observers and consultants from other religious traditions. But the time would seem to be ripe for some sort of public initiative on their part. So here is a friendly suggestion. The LDS leadership could now comment on the fact that the Romney campaign occasioned many distorted characterizations of Mormon thought. They could also point to the fact that there are serious theological scholars, especially many evangelicals, who—while clearly disagreeing with Mormon theology on some very essential points—have shown an interest in presenting the differences in fair and careful ways. The Mormon leaders could give their official blessing to dialogue with such scholars, and ask for their assistance in clarifying those elements of Mormon thought that are most susceptible to criticism from the perspective of traditional Christianity.

Such a project would benefit evangelicals as well. We claim to take the Bible seriously. We even make much of the need to acknowledge the Ten Commandments in public life. One of those commandments says this: "Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbor." When we tell Mormons what they really believe, without first of all engaging them in a neighborly dialogue aimed at understanding their beliefs in their own terms, we have violated that important commandment. There is no question that if false-witness-bearing is happening to any degree in American life, we evangelicals are the primary sinners. Our disagreements with Mormons are indeed very real. Because such things are not only relevant to public life but are of eternal importance, we need to be sure we are clear about where the real disagreements lie. The LDS leadership has a marvelous

opportunity right now to invite evangelicals and Mormons to learn together how to be better neighbors!

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