

Mormonism may sour Romney for some in Christian right
By Nina J. Easton, Globe Staff | August 30, 2005

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But an examination of the views of powerful Christian right groups suggests that, even as some of these voters might appreciate Romney's lifelong commitment to his church, the governor's Mormon faith could become an obstacle for others among this same group, who make up a large and vocal segment of Republican primary voters.

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Protestant evangelicals commonly overlook vast theological differences to form political alliances with people of other faiths, particularly conservative Catholics and Jews. But the Mormon Church, in particular, faces an activist opposition from a faction of conservative Protestants.

Most anti-Mormon activists come from "the right wing of the evangelical community," said Robert L. Millet, professor of religion at Brigham Young University. The Southern Baptists are a key piece of the right wing, which also contains a range of Christian fundamentalists.

That's not to say Romney can't attract votes from evangelical Protestants by advertising his success running the 2002 Winter Olympics in Salt Lake City, his experience running a major state, and his increasingly conservative views on social issues such as abortion -- the three building blocks of his potential candidacy, according to advisers and other political leaders.

"There are key doctrinal differences between Mormons and Baptists -- and most other evangelicals," said David S. Dockery, board chairman of the Council for Christian Colleges and Universities. "But I don't see that that would be an issue [in a presidential bid] because he would share many of the same views on political and cultural issues, especially related to life and family, the economy and the environment."

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of chess game" over presidential politics "is not something we want to participate in."

Romney, who oversaw the Boston area's Mormon congregations for nine years, is not the first church member to seriously consider a run for president. Others include his own father, George Romney, the popular governor of Michigan who dropped out shortly before the 1968 primaries; former representative Morris K. Udall of Arizona, who lost his bid for the Democratic nomination in 1976; and Utah Senator Orrin Hatch, who dropped out of the 2000 Republican primary race after a poor showing in the Iowa caucuses.

Even Joseph Smith Jr., the self-proclaimed prophet who founded the church in 1830, made a bid for the Oval Office. His campaign in 1844, the year James K. Polk beat Henry Clay, ended with his murder in June at the hands of an anti-Mormon mob.

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But political power doesn't guarantee an open door to Washington's religious social world of Bible meetings and prayer groups, said John M. Haddow, a member of the Mormon Church and a Washington attorney who once served as Hatch's legislative director and remains close to a number of leading Mormon political figures.

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Chief among those is the Mormon Church's assertion that early Christian leaders fell away from God's truth (a waywardness called the "Apostasy") and that it took Smith's discovery of the Book of Mormon -- a historical account that asserts ancient Hebrew tribes landed here and became the ancestors of Native Americans -- to "restore" true Christianity. The Book of Mormon refers to two churches: the Mormon Church is "the church of the Lamb of God" and the other is "the church of the devil."

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The early Mormons faced violence and persecution for their religious beliefs and practice of polygamy, which the church has long since outlawed and now vigorously condemns. Today, expressions of anti-Mormonism manifest themselves on websites, in books and documentaries, and through invective sometimes hurled by Christian fundamentalists at temple-goers in Salt Lake City.

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"One of the first things that puts off traditional Christians is the idea of a restoration [of Christianity] being required," said Millet. "Catholics and Protestants would believe in a continuation of Christianity without a break."

Mormons believe that "although there were wonderful truths and people" during that nearly 2,000-year period between the death of Christ's apostles and Smith's revelations in 19th-century America, "that divine authority was lost," Millet added. "That belief places people in a defensive position."

While Mormons rely on the Old and New Testaments, they also consider the Book of Mormon -- the revelations of prophets that came to Smith -- to be the word of God.

Another distinction is the Mormon conception of God, including a belief that in the afterlife humans can become divine -- in Smith's words, "what God is."

"This is the kind of belief that can be very much made fun of," said Jan Shipps, a leading historian of the Mormon Church and professor emerita at Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis. "The Southern Baptists and others in the religious right have done a lot with this."

Dobson's Focus on the Family website features a guide for teaching Christianity to children that lumps Mormons in with pagan worship. "God cannot be identified with an object, such as a metal or wooden idol, or with some aspect of nature, such as a star or tree, or with a person, such as Japan's Emperor Hirohito in World War II or the Mormon religion's notion of god," the guide declares.

There have been recent efforts to bridge the divide between evangelicals and Mormons. Millet notes he and other Mormons are invited to join scholarly sessions. "There's a new breed of evangelical who is at least willing to put Mormonism on the table," he says.

Millet and Johnson speak together at sessions around the country in an effort to create better understanding on both sides. Last year their group, Standing Together Ministries, helped organize an event in which evangelical philosopher Ravi Zacharias was invited to speak at the Mormon Tabernacle in Salt Lake City -- the first appearance by someone of another faith in more than a century.

In a Romney race for president, where Christian evangelicals see in the Massachusetts governor a like-minded leader on moral questions, some evangelical leaders say the issue may come down to a basic political question: Who's the competition? "If he were running against Bill Frist or George Allen -- if [evangelical voters] have a choice between a social conservative who is an evangelical or a social conservative who is a Mormon -- most are going to choose a social conservative who is an evangelical," said Richard Land, who runs public affairs for the Southern Baptist Convention.

"But if Mitt Romney were running against Rudy Giuliani," Land added, referring to the socially liberal former mayor of New York, "he'd probably get a lot more votes than Rudy."

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