

The First Mormon President: Does Faith Matter?

Barack Obama made history as the first African-American president of the United States in 2008. This year could also be historic if GOP presumptive nominee Mitt Romney were to be elected America's first Mormon president.

That milestone will involve a number of complexities.

A Misunderstood Faith?

On the campaign trail, Romney keeps his focus simple: Fix the economy. But others are fixated on something else: his faith.

He would be the first Mormon president, a topic deemed worthy of cover stories by *Time* and *Newsweek*. It's a faith not many understand.

Some call it a cult, but in an 2007 interview with CBN News Romney said he's unfazed by such charges.

"There's very little that bothers me and that's in part because when people make references that I disagree with, I generally conclude they just don't have all the facts and if they had all the facts they'd feel differently," the then-Massachusetts governor said.

At a Mormon sacrament service near Salt Lake City, the Smoot family said they're tired of being viewed differently by others but know it comes with the territory.

"You know, polygamy is always the first thing that's thrown out," Scott Smoot told CBN News. "It's been 122 years—for me, that's 2 1/2 lifetimes ago—since polygamy was taken away from the church or not permitted."

The Curiosity Factor

So would Romney's faith pose a problem? According to a Gallup

poll, 18 percent of Americans say they would not vote for a well-qualified presidential candidate who happened to be a Mormon.

But a Pew Research poll shows that a majority of voters who are aware of his faith say it doesn't present a problem.

Whatever the case, the scrutiny is on the way in the 2012 race for the White House.

Smoot's wife, Denise, told CBN News that if Romney became president, it would be "huge" for the faith.

"Obviously it's going to put us out there, and we're going to get controversy on both sides," Denise Smoot said.

"And people are going to want to know his story," she continued. "They're going to want to know a little bit more about who we are. And I think for the most part, it will be positive."

As for the Mormon Church, they're ready for the questions.

"We've been under the limelight since our beginnings and this is just, perhaps, a little more intense in this Internet age and media age," LDS Church Elder Richard Hinckley told CBN News.

"But sure, we love to tell our story," he said. "We have a great story to tell, and we love every opportunity we have to tell it."

Secrecy and Doctrine

The church will get that chance, as critics appear ready for vigorous exploration.

There are generally two areas of concern. The first is secrecy.

Only certain Mormons under specific circumstances are allowed

into the temples for ritual ceremonies.

“I think it’s the sacred nature of what goes on in the temples. The sacred covenants we make, and so forth,” Hinckley told CBN News. “We don’t invite the world, for example, to witness a wedding ceremony.”

The other issue involves doctrine, especially among Christians who believe the Bible is the inerrant word of God. Mormons add the Book of Mormon as additional revelation from God.

They also don’t believe in the traditional definition of heaven and hell.

“Those two designations, heaven and hell, aren’t large enough for us to be honest with you,” Hinckley said. “Paul talked about gradations of glory, if you will, in his writings. He said there are glories telestial, terrestrial, and celestial.”

Mormons also don’t believe in the trinity, the fact that God is three beings all in one.

“We don’t accept that,” Hinckley told CBN News. “They are one in purpose and in function, but separate in being. Separate in physical being, so that’s another major difference.”

Ex-Mormons Weigh In

Yet Mormons call themselves Christians, which raises eyebrows, especially within evangelical circles.

Shawn McCraney is a former Mormon who now hosts a show called, *Heart of the Matter*, where he witnesses to Mormons in Salt Lake City.

“I loved my activity in the LDS church, great organization,” he said. “But I didn’t know the Lord and that led me to an internal angst.”

“What happened was I came to realize that there was nothing I could do to get myself right before God—where with Mormonism,

yes they believe in Jesus and everything, but it's you have to do it," he explained. "He gives you the opportunity, but it's up to you to perform, and I couldn't perform."

But any controversy over a Mormon president may not center on theology as much as whether Romney would put loyalty to the Mormon Church ahead of anything else.

Former Mormon and author Michael Moody has written the book *Mitt, Set Our People Free*, and he has his doubts.

"When I was a little boy, the Mormon prophet was a more important man than the president of the United States," Moody told CBN News.

"Mitt Romney has knelt in the Mormon temples," he noted. "He has taken an oath of consecration. He has taken an oath of sacrifice. He has said that he will sacrifice everything that he is, and give all of his talents and everything that he has and is to the Mormon Church."

Governing as a Mormon

More than 50 years ago, John F. Kennedy faced a similar problem as a Catholic. He gave a speech emphasizing that his loyalty to America would come first.

Romney did that same thing back in 2008.

"Let me assure you that no authorities of my church or of any other church for that matter, will ever exert influence on presidential decisions," he said then. "Their authority is theirs, within the province of church affairs, and it ends where the affairs of the nation begin."

Indeed, Romney set a precedent as governor of Massachusetts. He allowed alcohol sales on Sunday, even though the Mormon Church forbids alcohol.

It's a point he made to a skeptical radio show host in a moment caught on camera during the 2008 campaign.

"My church says I can't drink alcohol," Romney explained to Iowa's *Mickelson in the Morning* radio show host Jan Mickelson. "That's what my church says, that 'Mitt you can't drink alcohol.' Should I say as governor of Massachusetts we're stopping alcohol sales?"

"If you're not going to separate your religion, you better make everybody not drink alcohol," he said. "No, my religion is for me and how I live my life."

So what would it be like to have the first Mormon president?

"It would be interesting, but this church will go on with or without the first Mormon president or never having a Mormon president," Hinckley said. "It will go on."

"This church, in our belief—and I believe this so very strongly—is destined to grow more forward and fill the entire earth, with or without the Mitt Romneys of the world, or anyone else who might come along who might happen to be a member of our church, politically. It doesn't depend on him at all," he said.

Romney Mum on Faith

Romney makes little mention of his faith on the campaign trail. Still, some voters bring it up from time to time, making for uncomfortable moments.

When someone mentioned details from the Book of Mormon, Romney was forced to say that, "We're just not going to have a discussion about religion in my view."

And in the 2008 campaign, a woman asked Romney the following: "The Book of Mormon and the Bible. If you had a question and you had to make a decision where would the Bible be in that process?" she asked.

"I don't know that there's any conflict at all between the values of great faiths like mine, like yours, like other

faiths," he replied.

The Mormon Perception

The Mormon Church has been pro-active in attempting to let folks know they are regular people. They've launched a television promotional campaign called, "I'm a Mormon" that has been popular within that effort to change any stereotype people may have about Mormons.

On the positive side, there is no doubt that many people picture Mormons as successful, clean cut, upstanding citizens, who are also generous.

Why is that exactly?

Part of the reason resides at Welfare Square in Salt Lake City, where the church gives out homegrown products to those in need.

This is paid for on the first Sunday of every month, when each Mormon family donates the amount it would cost them to eat two meals. It's the principle of self-sacrifice.

"It's sacrifice where individuals give up something recognizing that they're helping in this case members of the church," Rick Foster, director of Welfare Square, explained.

The overall principles of serving and involvement are key within the Mormon faith.

"We apply what we are learning, and I think that's where you see the niceness come in. Because we are all about serving and helping others," Denise Smoot said.

Mormons definitely don't just show up for church on Sunday and let the rest of the week just pass them by.

"This gospel is not a Sunday-only gospel. It's an everyday gospel day for us," Hinckley said. "If it doesn't infuse one's life, what good is it?"

"We try and we teach that this is an everyday religion," he continued. "It's not just for the hereafter, it's for the here and now, and I think that's a great part of our theology, it's a great part of our teaching, it's a great part of who we are, of our culture."

The Church Culture

That culture revolves around the church. It's the center of the Mormons' world and it's where young children are taught early on to be leaders in the church.

That principle may indeed lead to success later in life.

"There's few places that you can go where a young 12-year-old boy can be a president of a quorum, and ... he stands up and conducts a meeting, and he has an agenda and how to conduct an activity." Scott Smoot explained. "And they're kind of taught all the way through."

The Mormon way has been a successful way for many within the faith. Romney could be their biggest success story yet, especially if he succeeds as the first Mormon president.

"Well, it might work that way; it might work against us," Hinckley explained. "If he became president and failed and became very unpopular, it could work against us. So, again, we don't put any stock in that—now or in the future."

Others like Moody said a Romney victory would be a big deal for the Mormon Church.

"If Mitt Romney gets in the White House, it's going to be a sign to all of the Mormon people that they're on the right path, that this is the truth, and it's going to help perpetuate their missionary program. It's going to put the Mormon Church in a more powerful position," Moody reasoned.

Whatever happens, Romney hopes Americans put him in the most powerful position in the world, whether he's a Mormon or not.