

Why Mitt Romney's Mormonism Might Matter



Ever since Mitt Romney ran to be the Republican nominee for U.S. President back in 2007 and 2008, people have been talking about whether his Mormon faith matters. Mormonism is a particular worry for Evangelical Christians, many of whom don't believe that Mormonism is a Christian faith. It forced Romney to address his faith while on the campaign trail, including in this speech at the George H.W. Bush Library in Texas.

The issue of whether a presidential candidate's faith matters has lingered for decades. When John F. Kennedy, a Catholic, became president, it was seen as a breakthrough for the mostly Protestant U.S. Now, the vice president is Catholic and both Rick Santorum, a Catholic, and Newt Gingrich, a convert to Catholicism, are in the running for the Republican nomination. Santorum even received support from evangelical leaders this week.

Romney's faith has been danced around during this campaign, but was briefly the subject of debate when a prominent Evangelical minister and supporter of Texas Governor Rick Perry questioned Romney's Christian credentials during late 2011.

While Romney was battling his own questions of faith in 2007 and 2008, current President Barack Obama faced relentless scrutiny from conservative pundits such as Sean Hannity, criticized then-candidate Obama's longtime association with the Rev. Jeremiah Wright, who made controversial comments about race and the U.S.

People began to wonder, and still do, if President Obama's close friendship with Rev. Wright says something about his character.

Back to Romney.

Five U.S. ambassadors to the Vatican endorsed Romney this week, potentially putting aside some Catholic questions about a Mormon in the White House. Catholics, in practice, do not recognize a Mormon baptism.

"We the undersigned former U.S. Ambassadors to the Holy See — Thomas Melady, Ray Flynn, James Nicholson, Francis Rooney and Mary Ann Glendon — are united in our wholehearted support for the candidacy of Mitt Romney for the Presidency of the United States because of his commitment to and support of the values that we feel are critical in a national leader," they wrote in a collective statement.

Continuing, they wrote: "Although our political affiliations are diverse, we recognize the importance of family and traditional values in American life. We also share the conviction that Governor Romney has the experience, vision and commitment to the common good that our country needs at this crucial moment in history."

Members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints believe that Jesus Christ returned after his resurrection, this time to America. He preached, according to the Book of Mormon, to Native Americans long before missionaries came preaching Christianity. Those Native Americans were Nephites, who many Mormon scholars believe were descendants of people who had left Jerusalem.

This is the Book of Mormon's account of Jesus' appearance to them:

"Arise and come forth unto me, that ye may thrust your hands into my side, and also that ye may feel the prints of the nails in my hands and in my feet, that ye may know that I am the God of Israel, and the God of the whole earth, and have been slain for the sins of the world" (3 Nephi 11:14).

Most Christians across the world believe Christ will come again to judge the living and the dead. Mormons believe that Jesus did come again already... to America.

And that, to me, is what's interesting about Romney as a candidate.

A Mormon's account of North American history is fundamentally different from that of most Christians, virtually every other faith and anyone else. In Mormon history, North America was the site of an appearance of Jesus Christ, which is no small thing. It differs from historians' and archeologists' own research.

Jesus came here to create his church and it was restored by, as Mormons see it, prophet Joseph Smith. America is an exceptional place because of this unique historical event, according to Mormons.

Of course, many people will point out that many Catholics in North America and beyond believe that the Blessed Virgin Mary has appeared in Mexico, Lourdes and Fatima. There are also several other unconfirmed sightings. That's always worthy of discussion.

Romney isn't running for Historian in Chief. He's running to be President of the United States. The land's history is taught to children in classrooms across the country. Does it matter that Romney, as a Mormon, believes in a history that includes the assertion that Jesus Christ lived here and continued his teachings? That, without question, is different from the mainstream. Does he need to disavow it? No. Should he explain why these historical events are true if he believes them. Possibly.

Can a man be President of the United States if he views its history and origins vastly different than the average American? Again, it's worthy of discussion.