

Mormonism Is Not Dead (As a Political Issue)

By Jesse Christopherson

The women and children wept; the men took a few moments, and then a few more, to collect themselves. Finally, Mitt Romney walked onto a stage in front of thousands of the deeply disappointed to deliver the final word. No Rovian spin, no overly clever unskewing could redeem the moment. The first Mormon president would be somebody else.

The postmortem began before the tears were dry. Having baffled himself with his own bullshit, the Republican nominee was "blindsided" and "shellshocked" by losing. What explanations for the failure could make sense to a mind with so much faith in its destiny? Shortly before Election Day, Romney claimed that he had not prepared remarks in case of a loss.¹ Autodidact Karl Rove delivered an impressively academic 19-point list rationalizing Romney's shortcomings and his own perfect record of losses in the Senate. Donald Trump called the election a "sham and a travesty" and, thinking Romney had won the popular vote, called the Electoral College "a disaster for democracy."

Within a couple of days though, the waters settled and Republicans agreed on an effective talking point: President Obama won reelection because he had given "gifts" to minority special interest groups: birth control for women, health care and remission of college loan interest for the young, and "amnesty" to children of undocumented immigrants for Hispanics. That explanation, though rather sour, filled a vacuum. It was immediately accepted as conventional wisdom in the conservatosphere but largely ignored in the national media until Mitt Romney, perhaps trying to salvage a scrap of pride, repeated it on a conference call to fundraisers and, apparently unbeknownst to him, reporters. With this new demonstration of tone-deafness the lately former leader of the Republican Party truncated his relevance to modern politics even further, and Republicans who had actually been elected to something (and Newt Gingrich) opportunistically tromped all over him.

No one though, even in the chaotic first days after the election, offered Romney's religion as an explanation for his loss. This is surely an oversight.

As recently as June 2012, in the prickly heat of the presidential campaign, 10 percent of Republicans and 24 percent of Democrats said they would not
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vote for "a generally well qualified person who happened to be Mormon." If those anti-Mormons stuck to their conviction, then their bias is one reason Romney lost. Maybe the media, typically unwilling to treat religion as anything other than a sacrosanct personal whim, willed away that narrative. News organizations, lacking initiative to report on anything other than the political implications of prefabricated "talking points," and "gaffes"² may not have retained the capacity to investigate it.

Will the Mormon issue recede back into the Rockies (or its La Jolla mansion)?

Mormon reporter McKay Coppins, assigned to the Romney campaign, recounted that when another reporter asked a nonchalant, "full voice" question about the Mormon magic underwear (properly called the garments of the holy priesthood³), he surmised that all the attention to his religion has advanced the public's attitude about Mormonism from adolescent sniggering thrill to semi-bored curiosity.⁴

"I saw some pictures of the underwear online," the underwhelmed reporter told Coppins. "They didn't seem very weird to me."

Coppins also quoted a (lately former) Romney campaign adviser who thinks Mitt Romney is not just a Mormon Al Smith⁵, but a Mormon JFK, too. "It's going to be a non-event next time a Mormon runs," the adviser said.

Indeed, a Mormon may have a shot at the presidency sooner rather than later despite the anti-Mormon bias evident from surveys because voters faced with Mitt Romney in particular seem to come down with sudden cases of Mormonphobia. In 1968, when Romney's father George was a candidate, 17 percent of Americans would balk at choosing a Mormon to run the country. In 1999, the number was still 17 percent. Mormon Senator Orrin Hatch's campaign gave voters the willies in 2000, and the number of Mormon rejecters grew steadily to a peak of 24 percent in 2007, just before Romney lost the Republican primary. After that, perhaps thinking they had seen the last of him, relieved Americans felt slightly more ecumenical and the percentage fell to 17 again. Realizing their mistake almost immediately when Romney never stopped campaigning, they rose to 22 percent in 2011. Most recently, it has landed at 18, near the historical norm.

Maybe Romney was just the wrong Mormon for the job. He is no Al Smith, defeated Romney cheerleaders notwithstanding, because religion is likely to be a more prominent theme next time. Sleeper issues, including mainstream Christian views of Mormonism (Mormons are not real Christians), the authoritarian and theocratic nature of the Mormon Church, and current and
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historical Mormon policy regarding blacks, women, and gays, will find a way to become liabilities for Jon Huntsman, Jim Matheson, Mia Love, or whomever the next Mormon candidate for president is.

Whether a candidate's religion should be a political issue is divisive. Opponents say that to judge a person based on religion is intolerance: an ugly bias based on meaningless stereotypes. Proponents say that religion can represent a person's core values, and so it is highly germane to politics, which after all is the art of choosing people who will impose their values on society using the blunt instrument of law.

President Obama chose to ignore the issue entirely. Even surrogates, traditionally tasked with the more distasteful campaign duties, were mum on Mormonism. There are several explanations. First, the president may have been trying, after the low controversy over his own church habits in 2008, to simply do what he thought was right and decent. Frankly, Mormon leaders got nothing on Rev. Wright. Second, the Obama campaign may have known that the stubborn chunk of America that

would never vote for a Mormon was big enough already, calculating that any attempt to coax that chunk to swell could backfire disastrously. In that case, a Mormon strategy may have been prepared but never executed. Third, one of the president's most public and controversial surrogates was Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid, who is a faithful, churchgoing Mormon.⁶

However, even Senator Reid's religion was curiously unremarked upon at appropriate moments during the campaign. Selecting Senator Reid as a surrogate to attack Romney on taxes must have had something to do with their shared religion; perhaps it was a defense against accusations of anti-Mormonism, especially since Romney's tax issues are tightly tied to his church.⁷ It may have also been an inoculation against Mormon backlash. If so, Senator Reid could claim credit for Obama's impressive performance—he earned 21 percent of the Mormon vote, better than Senator John Kerry's 19 percent in 2004. Romney, bearing ecclesiastical bone fides, apparently earned a smaller proportion of the Mormon vote than President George W. Bush did.

If President Obama had decided to address Romney's religion he would have been faced with the trouble of finding a starting point. Though it could seem entirely predictable and thus easily dismissible for a black man⁸ to cry bigotry, he might have echoed Christopher Hitchens, who said in *Slate* five years ago:

"It is not just legitimate that [Romney] be asked about the beliefs that he has not just held, but has caused to be spread and caused to be inculcated into children. It is essential. Here is the most salient reason: Until 1978, the so-called 44 The Human Prospect Volume 2 Number 3

Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints was an officially racist organization. Mitt Romney was an adult in 1978. We need to know how he justified this to himself, and we need to hear his self-criticism, if he should chance to have one."

What Hitchens calls official racism is the Mormon Church policy, effective from at least the time of Brigham Young until Romney was 31 years old, which prohibited anyone with the slightest bit of black African ancestry from participating in the lay priesthood that constitutes the leadership structure of the Church. Mormons consider the priesthood to be literally the authority to act in God's name. The policy meant that blacks were always subordinate, and could not hold any authority over a White person.⁹

The Church, despite always characterizing the policy as one of God's inscrutable commandments, and not intentionally racist on their part, amended God's word after other schools boycotted its flagship university's sports teams, and the church found itself without priesthood-eligible leaders in places like Brazil (and shortly after, Africa itself) where it was poised to rapidly expand its membership.¹⁰

President Obama's reluctance to implicate Romney in his religion's racist past undoubtedly prevented a gratuitous alienation from younger, more liberal Mormons. The Mormon Church of 2012 is not racist in policy or sentiment. President Obama's improvement on Senator Kerry's performance with Mormon voters is one indicator of that. Culturally, American Mormons are about as racist as one would expect a racially homogenous, insular group to be – but they are not racist like, for example, that group of bigots concentrated in the American South whose racism is cultural, kept alive by real-world racial friction. As in the general population, the more racist generations are

aging and dying.¹¹ Younger Mormons have grown up without any sense that their church is, or ever was racist. They feel genuinely puzzled, and therefore offended, by any allegation that they share responsibility for an outmoded policy. To the shame of the institution though, it has not specifically repudiated the overtly racist theology which was, if not official doctrine, publicly preached as the word of God by Mormon authorities. The Church chose instead to try to paper over the mess in an overtly obtuse public statement in February 2012:

"For a time in the Church there was a restriction on the priesthood for male members of African descent. It is not known precisely why, how, or when this restriction began in the Church but what is clear is that it ended decades ago. Some have attempted to explain the reason for this restriction but these attempts should be viewed as speculation and opinion, not doctrine. The Church is not bound by speculation or opinions given with limited understanding."⁴⁵ *The Human Prospect* Volume 2 Number 2

These "who-me?" and head-in-the-sand poses are familiar to observers of Mormonism. The Church has struck either or both, for example, when confronted with evidence that contradicts the historicity of *The Book of Mormon*. When church authority B.H. Roberts presented his concerns in the 1920s about the plausibility that the *Book of Mormon* was literally a record of ancient American civilizations, higher-ups who had commissioned his research ignored him. More recently, genetic evidence that didn't support an ancient origin for *The Book of Mormon* prompted not adult acknowledgement, but subtle shifts of wording and a newfound righteous skepticism toward the previously mainstream Mormon belief that American Indians were synonymous with the Lamanites of scripture.¹²

Mormon apologists are quick to discredit past policies, pronouncements, even doctrines, that are no longer comfortable for the Church culturally. However, they do not seem to care about, or maybe even consider, the implications of their tactics; it can be amusing to watch critics rage in frustration each time the Church flips its way through a doctrinal dilemma, but such reactions to "facts" and "history" also undermine the Church's credibility in the eyes of the educated Mormon.

When books, sermons, and revelations of the past on the subjects of race, history, and sexuality are discarded at a moment's notice, consigned to the opinion pile of history, what credibility do today's books, sermons and revelations maintain? If one spares even a moment's thought for the morrow, *stare decisis*¹³ can be a bitch.

President Obama also declined to encourage the fear that Romney would take orders from Salt Lake City. When Senator John Kennedy ran for president, he reinvigorated the Protestant majority's centuries-long legacy of antipapism. In a 1960 speech to a group of Baptist preachers Kennedy boldly denied that religion would influence his policy decisions, and invited interrogation. His deft touch put an end to the Catholic issue.

Candidate Romney, in contrast, was not politically capable of emphasizing the division between church and state because a huge swath of the base he hoped to attract finds the concept anathema. Kennedy essentially made a case for secularism, while Romney specifically decried it, and said, "freedom requires religion." He also said, "in recent years, the notion of the separation of church

and state has been taken by some well beyond its original meaning," and reaffirmed his active faith in the Mormon Church.

However, Romney also "assured" us that, "no authorities of my church, or of any other church for that matter, will ever exert influence on presidential decisions. Their authority is theirs, within the province of church affairs, and it 46 The Human Prospect Volume 2 Number 3

ends where the affairs of the nation begin."

Politically expedient and blithely reassuring, those words were false on their face. It would not be possible, even under the influence of genuine desire, for a dedicated adherent (which Kennedy, incidentally, was libidiously not) to quarantine politics within a religious mind. Historian of Mormonism D. Michael Quinn described the late Mormon Apostle and U.S. Senator Reed Smoot's relationship with his Church as, "the non-threatening independence of those who usually shared identical views about political matters."¹⁴ Romney's nature forces him to follow Smoot's precedent. The firewall between Romney and the Church would be about as significant as the one between the Romney campaign and the super PACs formed to support him.

Mormon theology encourages Church members to seek the personal guidance of the Holy Ghost in questions both portentous and quotidian. Almost certainly, like Congresswoman Michelle Bachmann, Romney had a personal witness of God's approval of his political aspirations. Like President George W. Bush, he was a tool in God's hands, a man with a mission.

Further contradicting Romney's description of the limits of ecclesiastical authority, the prophet and apostles of the Mormon Church consider themselves more than corporate administrators or modest preachers. They are also "prophets to the whole world," literal conduits for God's word, whose warnings and commandments will be the standard by which everyone, not just Mormons, will be judged in the last days.

Romney is nothing like Jack Kennedy. The effect his Mormonism has on the future of presidential politics will be completely unlike the effect Kennedy's Catholicism had.

Though a Mormon takeover of the American government is unlikely, certain theocratic strains within the Church have affected national politics. Historically, Mormons have indulged an impulse to institute God's law politically. Eager for the Second Coming of Jesus Christ, when the Mormon priesthood hierarchy would take its place as a world government, Joseph Smith established a Council of Fifty as a government-in-waiting. Though the Council never fulfilled its destiny, it did assist Smith in his 1844 campaign for the United States presidency. After Smith's assassination, the Council of Fifty functioned as a legislature in Deseret (later Utah) under the direction of second Church President and temporal dictator Brigham Young.

Extant prophecies and associated myths and rumors still point to the Church as the eventual political salvation of the United States and its Constitution. As the www.thehumanprospect.com 47

Kingdom of God, the Church is destined eventually to take up political power under the corporeal direction of Jesus Christ.¹⁵

That might sound scary to even the most casual citizen, but what would it mean should a Mormon occupy the White House? It almost certainly would mean nothing like previous Mormon fantasies of dominating the country. However, Mormon theocracy occasionally pops up to change the political landscape of the United States. Mormon support was a key to the passage of Prohibition, and the principal thrust behind the more recent anti-marriage equality movement. Both efforts were powered by the conviction that God had spoken to Mormon prophets, and that it was a saint's duty to enforce His word.

The political reality though is that the tail can wiggle the dog a little bit. Pragmatism is one of the Church's highest values.¹⁶ If the U.S. president were Mormon, the Church's first goal would be to show the world that it is utterly mainstream and unthreatening. It would not risk a backward step by encouraging Romney to favor the Church or advocate its political imperatives. The Church, not the government, would change its policies, in order to give cover to the Mormon president's political career.¹⁷

Long past its days of anti-American isolation in Deseret, the Church wants to be successful in the mainstream. A Mormon president would be a key to broad cultural acceptance of a religion whose cult status was just recently rescinded by fundamentalist Christian leaders.¹⁸

The Church has modified its policies in order to favor success in politics and business before. The Mormon Church regularly preaches about the dangers of pornography, but it was shareholder and presidential candidate Mitt Romney, not the Mormon Church, who persuaded Marriott Hotels (founded and controlled by a prominent Mormon family) to stop providing on-demand pornography in hotel rooms.¹⁹

A Romney presidency would have been very similar to the last Bush presidency in terms of "faith-based initiatives" and dogma's influence on policy. Romney would have hoped to nominate to the Supreme Court the last crucial vote to overturn Roe vs. Wade, he would have been hostile to sex education, he would have spent tax dollars on religious charities, and he would have struck birth control from the foreign aid manifests. Fears specific to Mormonism should and did pale in comparison with that Bush-esque preview. However, in the Oval Office, Mormonism, relatively sophisticated philosophically, would be far less of an existential threat to American participation in Enlightenment values than, for example, Sarah Palin's dominionist Assemblies of God, or Congressman Paul Ryan's Ayn Rand fixation.www.facebook.com/humanprospect 48

What matters is not that he is Mormon, but that he is very religious. More religious than the broader electorate's mean. He is no lay Catholic; he is a man who held an ecclesiastical office that commands respect and authority roughly equivalent in scope to a Catholic bishop.

Could one vote for a Mormon for president? Not one like Romney: a church leader who interprets the tenets of his faith to be compatible with the anti-human platform that passes for conservatism in America today.

However, yes, one could vote for a Mormon. One could have voted enthusiastically for Mo Udall.²⁰ One admires Harry Reid and Senator Tom Udall, and, though there would surely be a better option on a presidential ballot, one respects Senator-elect Jeff Flake.

President Obama took the high road this time, bypassing Romney's religion without a glance. Surrogates, supporters, and the media followed his example, and the Mormon issue went dormant. However, those skeptical of Mormonism's religious doctrine and the results of its mixture with politics are growing in number. Next time, Mormonism may be the main event.

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1 One assumes he was trying to project confidence, but in a typical demonstration of political clumsiness, Romney volunteered information on an issue best avoided.

2 Defined as any non-talking points that escape a candidate's mouth

3 www.mormontopics.org/eng/garments

4 <http://www.buzzfeed.com/mckaycoppins/a-mormon-reporter-on-the-romney-bus>

5 Catholic U.S. presidential candidate who lost the 1928 election to Herbert Hoover partly because of widespread bias against his religion. Some see his campaign as paving the way for JFK's. www.thehumanprospect.com 49

6 Roughly 80 percent of Mormons vote Republican and 20 percent vote Democratic. My late Mormon grandmother, knowing my political persuasion, had little to say about Senator Reid when we talked politics in 2008. To her, Romney was a real Mormon, probably sent by God – a stake president, to boot. And Reid was a grimace and a byword. (The Book of Mormon 1 Nephi 19:14, and 3 Nephi 16:9)

7 Except in Utah or Idaho, bumping into another Mormon outside of church is a notable coincidence. According to the 2008 American Religious Identification Survey, only 3.2 million Americans, or 1.4 percent of the population, identify as Mormon.

8 Or a Mormon, for that matter.

9 Even today a woman in Mormonism is bereft of priesthood authority, except by proxy through her husband to whom she pledges obedience in the temple ceremonies. People, including all homosexuals, who habitually engage in extramarital sex are similarly disempowered.

10 One can see here a hint of why women and gays are still second-class in Mormonism, though far more women than gays stay affiliated with the Church, for obvious reasons. To the extent that the rate of antidepressant consumption correlates with unhappiness, women in Utah are among the most miserable.

11 This in spite of the unique structure of the governing Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, which actually includes 15 men ranked by earliest join date. The longest-serving is "called" as president of the Church and chooses two counselors, and presides with them as the "First Presidency." Because a calling to the Quorum is for life, Mormon leadership has been described as a "gerontocracy."

12 <http://www.mormonwiki.org/Lamanite>

13 The legal principle of precedent, which provides consistent application of the law. Stare decisis gives those subject to the law the confidence that their behavior is legal.

14 For the source of that quotation and much more information on Mormon politicians' relationships with the Church, see <http://www.vanityfair.com/politics/2012/10/mormon-politicians-lds-church-romney>.

15 http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Council_of_Fifty 50 The Human Prospect Volume 2 Number 3

16 Which is what has distinguished the mainstream Church from its schismatic rivals, e.g. the polygynous Fundamentalist Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints.

17 One notes that the Mormon Church, after a startlingly vehement attack on California's Proposition 8 in 2008, stayed out of the marriage equality initiatives in Maine, Maryland, Minnesota, and Washington, which were all decided in favor of equality.

18 Whether the reprieve was provisional, based on a Romney victory, remains to be seen.

19 After Internet porn made it redundant. And the famously tea totaling Church still turns a blind eye to important members who sell alcohol. Perhaps they turn for precedent to Brigham Young, who founded Church-owned distilleries in Utah to make money from forty-niners and other travelers.

20 A Mormon congressman from Arizona who performed very well against Jimmy Carter in the early 1976 Democratic presidential primaries. He was called "too funny" to be president. Incidentally, Carter surrogate Coleman Young attacked Udall for the Church's policy regarding African ancestry.