**The Mormon Moment in Historical Perspective: Mormon Candidates for National Office, the Use of Anti-Mormonism in Elections, and the Current Campaign of Obama versus Romney**

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Three weeks ago the “Mormon Moment,” a name created by the American press corps to describe the increased publicity which the LDS Church is receiving because of Mitt Romney’s Presidential Campaign, reached a new plateau when Romney accepted the Republican Party’s nomination. The Mormon journey to a starring role on the national stage had taken decades to achieve. From its very origins, the Mormon Church has struggled to gain acceptance, not only from national political parties but also from mainstream Christians, because of its peculiar beliefs and practices (which included polygamy), and because Mormon’s tendency to associate only among themselves.

Romney is not the first Mormon to seek the U.S. Presidency. Joseph Smith, the founder of Mormonism, ran for that high office as an Independent in 1844. Although Smith’s platform addressed national issues it has been described as an effort to expand his concept of Zion, which included thrusts of communitarianism, to the entire nation. Although some historians have claimed that Smith would have captured enough electoral votes to throw the election from James Polk to Henry Clay, if he had not been shot down by assassins’ bullets before the election, he was never a serious national candidate.

After Smith’s assassination the Mormons moved to the Far West and began to skirmish with the federal government over the practice of polygamy. The Church finally abandoned that practice (and its communitarian aspirations) 1890 and immediately thereafter encouraged its members to participate in both national political parties. In 1903 Reed Smoot, a Mormon apostle and Republican was elected and became the first Mormon member of the United States Senate and by the 1930s he was one it’s most powerful members. During Smoot’s tenure in the United States Senate the LDS Church constructed a chapel in Washington that was patterned after the Salt Lake Temple and which became a symbol of the church’s transformation.

In 1952 President Dwight Eisenhower selected Ezra Taft Benson, another Mormon apostle, to become a member of his cabinet and his successor John F. Kennedy selected another Mormon, Stewart Udall, and a Democrat to become a member of his cabinet. The first Mormons who became serious national candidates for president emerged during the 1960s. In 1963 George Romney (Mitt’s Romney’s father) was elected Governor a Michigan and the following year he flirted with the idea of running as a moderate alternative to the ultra-conservative Barry Goldwater.

Lyndon Johnson crushed Goldwater in the general election and Romney decided in 1967 to officially declare his candidacy. Romney was initially the frontrunner but he stumbled badly when he claimed that he was ‘brain washed’ when he spoke with U.S. Generals in Viet Nam and thereafter Richard Nixon sailed to victory. But after Richard Nixon was elected President in 1968, he selected George Romney to be a member of his cabinet. Romney thereby became the third Mormon to achieve that status but he was never entirely comfortable serving in that position and he resigned before the Watergate scandal brought down the Nixon administration.

In 1976 Morris Udall (a prominent Mormon Democrat from Arizona) ran for the Democratic nomination in the aftermath of the Watergate scandal. Udall was a Congressman in a very Republican state but like Romney, he was considered a political moderate. He ran a smart campaign but he was not aggressive enough against his friend Jerry Ford who had served with him in the United States House of Representatives and he was eventually out-distanced by the ultimate outsider Jimmy Carter.

Both Udall’s and Romney’s campaigns took place when Mormonism was emerging as a fast growing and surprisingly modern American religion. In 1974, George Romney (and his son Mitt) attended the dedication of the Washington, D.C. Temple which replaced the Washington Chapel as the symbol of Mormonism in the nation’s capital. The Temple was a colossal post-modern structure which resembled the profile of the Salt Lake Temple but was constructed in white marble on a high promontory in rural Maryland. The dedication attracted non-Mormons and Mormons from throughout the country, who were not only impressed by the structure but also by the organization it represented.

The new Mormon temple was an outward manifestation of the Mormon Church’s growing presence in America and, in particular, its influence in the nation’s capital where the worldwide Marriott Corporation was headquartered and flourishing. During the dedication George Romney was clearly the most prominent Mormon present and his son Mitt was entirely shrouded in his shadow. Romney was a moderate Republican who had supported the Civil Rights movement and was surely a good role model as the LDS Church continued to make in-roads in its quest for respectability. In 1978, when the Mormons finally abandoned their anachronistic policy of denying priesthood ordination to African American males, the church continued its march to attracted converts from the American mainstream.

Nevertheless, the LDS Church also continued to refer to itself as a “peculiar Church.” The peculiarities can be separated into doctrines, practices, and characteristics. The doctrines, which many Christian religions agree are “peculiar,” include the Mormons’ view of the trinity, i.e. that there are actually three separate Gods in the Godhead; that man may become a God; and that there are extra biblical scriptures, including the Book of Mormon and the Doctrine of Covenants which is a compendium of modern day revelations. The peculiar practices of Mormonism have included polygamy and its refusal to ordain African American men (both of which have been abandoned), as well as the Word of Wisdom (under which Mormons may not smoke, or drink either alcohol or hot drinks), its Temple rituals which some have compared to those practiced in Masonic Temples, as well as its practice of baptizing persons for the dead. Finally, the Mormons peculiar characteristics include its lay ministry, under which Mormon businessmen preside over local congregations, the Church’s liberal Welfare Program, and the club-like atmosphere under which fellow Church members assist one another not only in religious affairs but in advancing their business careers.

 Despite these peculiarities, and perhaps because of them, the LDS Church continued to attract members and publicity. By 2002, when the Winter Olympic Games were held in Salt lake City the Church had developed a well oiled public relations program. Although Romney was still remembered as the son of George Romney he become the center of attention and brought the scandal-plagued and cash-strapped games to a successful conclusion. Romney bootstrapped the success of those games to his political career which he had aborted after his defeat by Edward Kennedy in his race for the U.S. Senate. In 2002 he was elected Governor of Massachusetts but he was clearly looking for a national audience as he took very moderate positions in that very liberal state.

In 2006 Romney decided to forego running for re-election and but within a year and one-half he instead declared his candidacy for the Republican nomination for President of the United States. He was immediately criticized within his own party (primarily by Evangelicals who form the base of that party) who questioned whether he was even a Christian because of Mormon Church’s “peculiar doctrines” and because he had advocated “liberal” positions while he was governor. Romney tried to overcome these criticisms by delivering an address on religion at the George Herbert Walker Bush’s Presidential Library but he continued to be lambasted by his opponents (including Baptist Minister Mike Huckabee) who made light of the Mormon belief in a pre-existence.

When Romney eventually lost the nomination to John McCain, many wondered whether a Mormon could ever be nominated by a party that was dominated by Evangelicals. Matt Homer, a graduate student at Harvard’s Kennedy School, observed after McCain was shellacked by Barak Obama that it was ironic that conservative Mormons continued to favor the Republican Party, whose origins were so closely associated with the anti-polygamy campaign and was dominated by the religious right which was so vehemently opposed to Mormon candidates. He observed that another Mormon named Harry Reid, who was the Senate majority leader and a strong Democrat had ascended to a higher level of federal authority than any previous Mormon, and that Reid’s party had never asked him to explain his Mormon beliefs.

 Between 2008 and 2012 the Mormon Moment took off and by the time Romney announced that he was running for President again it was rocking and rolling. During that period popular television programs, such as Big Love and Sister Wives, were broadcast which advanced the stereo-type of Mormon polygamy and the LDS was put on the defensive to explain that it has abandoned that practice more than one-hundred years earlier. Then in 2011 “The Book of Mormon, A Musical,” which does not focus polygamy but on the Mormon missionary program, began its successful run on Broadway.

During the same year the LDS Church’s public relations department began a public relations campaign (to coincide with the Broadway Play) which is entitled “I am a Mormon” in which a wide range of normal looking Mormons appear in print and on television to announce “I am a Mormon.” Just two weeks ago the “The Book of Mormon” began a production run in Los Angeles. This time the LDS Church purchased ads (in the playbill) which will include some of the same normal looking Mormons announcing that “I read the Book of Mormon. The Book is always better.” Finally, a local Salt Lake City community theater, The Salt Lake Acting Company, celebrated the Mormon moment by offering up a parody of Mitt Romney’s quest for the U.S. Presidency in “Saturday’s Voyeur.”

Within the past several weeks Pat Bagley (who is a nationally syndicated cartoonist and Will’s brother) wrote an interesting article in the *Salt Lake Tribune* in which he observed that comic artists are also taking a renewed interest in the Mormon moment and that some of their work is similar to Thomas Nast’s cartoons during the nineteenth century (he created the Democratic donkey and Republican elephant) which vilified both Catholics and Mormons. Although Bagley did not go into detail with examples I have noticed the same trend and I have two interesting examples.

The first example of a nasty anti-Mormon comic is the notorious Jack Chick’s new anti-Mormon comic book entitled *The Enchanter*. In 1984 Chick published *The Visitors* which was a twenty-two page booklet (less than 5” by 3”) in black and white with two panels per page. This was a mere pea-shooter compared to the new enhanced anti-Mormon comic book *The Enchanter* which Chick published after the commencement of the Mormon moment. The new comic book is part of *The Crusaders* series which has primarily focused on the anti-Catholic “Alberto” series. The second example is Sal Velluto’s worshipful depiction of Romney in his website “mittfitts” in which the Republican candidate stands up to Obama and all other Democrats even as he takes on super hero status. Velluto also plays with Thomas Nast’s depiction of the Democrats and Republicans as donkeys and elephants. Of course, Bagley’s depictions of Romney at a “super hero” are quite different than Velluto’s.

As the Republicans prepared for their convention and Romney’s coronation there was a huge spike in the Mormon moment. In August the NBC network broadcast a program, shortly before the Republican convention, which highlighted an interracial Mormon couple, a gay Mormon who serves in his Ward’s executive committee, a Mormon feminist who argues that women should hold the priesthood, the daughter of Jon Huntsman who has withdrawn from the church, as well as Dave Neeleman, a Mormon billionaire who runs Jet Blue airlines.

Al Jackson (an African American member who is married to a white woman) said during his interview that he has never been shunned because of his race but he did admit that he was embarrassed that he occasionally drank a Dr. Pepper which he apparently believed was against the Mormon Word of Wisdom since it contains caffeine. Ironically, shortly after this broadcast took place, the LDS Church announced that church members may imbibe soft drinks even if they contain caffeine. Since that time some BYU students have demanded that soft drinks (with caffeine) be sold on their campus. But the Board of Health in New York City headed in the opposite direction last week when it banned the sale of large sodas (with and without caffeine) which has lead to speculation concerning the sale of such drinks on the black market.

Shortly after these developments there was even more evidence of an enhanced Mormon moment during the Republican Convention in Tampa. The opening prayer was offered by a Mormon who had served with Romney in his Boston Bishopric. Perhaps even more significant, Romney asked three church members to inform the partisan audience to attest that when Romney served as a Mormon leader and home teacher in Boston that he provided compassionate service to fellow parishioners who were experiencing difficulties due to sickness, economic hardship or advanced age. When Romney finally spoke he proudly stated that he was raised a Mormon.

When Democrats met one week later in Charlotte a cadre of LDS Democrats formed a caucus which took full advantage of the Mormon moment. They invited Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid to deliver the keynote address. Reid reminded the caucus that Mitt Romney is not the first Mormon to run for President “though he might be the most conservative” and that “LDS beliefs about caring for the poor and protecting the environment fall in line with his votes in the Senate.” He also recommended that Utah “get a little more moderate. It is a little too right wing.” Another event which took place during the convention featured Scott Howell, a Utah Democrat who is running against Orrin Hatch, who stated that “for Latter-day Saints who are members of the Democratic Party, this is a ‘Mormon moment’ too!”

Following these conventions the Mormon Moment has continued at an even faster pace. Both Mormons and non-Mormons are taking hard positions concerning what Mitt Romney should say or do about his Mormon beliefs. Some liberal Mormons (who are also Democrats) have argued that since Mitt Romney has held leadership positions in the church that he has a higher responsibility to explain Mormon doctrines and practices to the American public. They have suggested, for example, that Romney should explain why the Church withheld priesthood ordination from African-American men, and why the LDS Church currently withholds the same priesthood authority from women. These Mormons complain that even though Romney’s campaign has brought additional publicity to their Church, that he has personally done nothing to engage his audiences concerning Mormonism beliefs.

It is ironic that liberal Mormons expect Romney to explain Mormon doctrines and policies to American voters. That makes about as much sense as requiring the two Vice-Presidential candidates (who are both Catholic) to explain the doctrines of infallibility and original sin. Even though these Mormons have argued that Romney is a lay leader and has more responsibility to explain these doctrines, it is doubtful that Romney, or most Mormon Bishops or Stake Presidents, would be able to explain Mormon beliefs concerning the Godhead, Eternal Progression, or Continuing Revelation since most Church members focus not on these “peculiarities” but instead on the Church impact on their families and communities.

Other Mormon liberals are more interested in telling the American electorate that not all Mormons are like Mitt Romney. They want to broaden American’s perspectives concerning their church by reminding them that there are gay, feminist, liberal, pro-choice and even Democrat Mormons. One Mormon feminist, Judy Dushku, who lived in Romney’s Ward and Stake, was apparently quite angry when Romney approached her at church and said: “Judy, I don’t know why you keep coming to church. You are not my kind of Mormon.” Of course, she acknowledged that she basically agree that she is not like Romney and emphasized that she does not believe that Mormons must be conservative (like Romney) in order to be a members in good standing.

Nevertheless, conservative Mormons, like Bill Marriott, are absolutely thrilled concerning the positive publicity generated by Romney’s campaign. Marriott claims that over 80 percent of that publicity has been positive. They are pleased that Romney is a shining example of how “normal” they are and they do not expect their torch bearer to explain away the church’s peculiar doctrines and practices. As such, it is not likely that Romney will take the bait and weigh in on Mormonism’s peculiarities or particularities. Instead he will stay on his message which is the economic condition of the United States.

Nevertheless, it is likely that American voters will have a better understanding concerning the history and the current beliefs of the LDS Church after the election cycle. The news magazine *U.S. News & World Report* recently reported that “interest in Mitt Romney’s Mormon faith is higher now than it has ever been before.” Mormon Democrats will continue to leverage the Mormon Moment by proselytizing their fellow parishioners to join their “Party” since the Democratic platform is much closer to the LDS notion of how to care for the less fortunate than the Republican’s more austere economic policies and because they can still be good Mormons and not think and act like Mitt Romney. They will point to Harry Reid, arguably the most powerful Mormon in America, as a potent example of what good Mormons can accomplish if they just keep putting their shoulders to the wheel.

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