

A Mormon president? Wisdom is what matters: Wisdom is what matters

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"Better to be ruled by a wise Turk than a foolish Christian," Martin Luther is alleged to have quipped. Whether or not he actually made this remark, the sentiment captures the paradoxical vision that Luther and many other Protestants have brought to politics. Yes, Christ is Lord of the political sphere as well as the spiritual sphere—Luther had no intention of denying that. But evidently, in this age before the eschaton, Christ rules the earthly city in a rather different way than he rules in the hearts of believers, for the virtues of wisdom, prudence and justice—virtues essential in those who govern—are found in people outside as well as inside the church.

In the coming months, many U.S. Christians will consider whether it might be better to be ruled by a Mormon than a Christian. Mitt Romney made an explicit appeal to Christian voters in December with his "Faith in America" speech, in which he declared that the particulars of his Mormon faith would not be a decisive factor in his presidency. In much the way John F. Kennedy presented himself as a Catholic in 1960, Romney insisted that in the U.S. "a person should not be elected because of his faith nor should he be rejected because of his faith."

But unlike Kennedy, who insisted that his faith was a private matter, Romney in his speech went on to try to establish himself as an honorary evangelical. Echoing the rhetoric of the Christian right, he said that he would not "separate government from God," and he even gave his own profession of faith: "Jesus Christ is the Son of God and the Savior of mankind." In short, Romney tried to have it both ways, saying in effect: "You should vote for me because I share your faith; but insofar as I, as a Mormon, don't share your faith, then it's a private matter and it would be un-American of you to make an issue of it."

Luther's dictum offers more clarity on these matters than Romney's muddled speech, for it points to the tasks and virtues peculiar to the work of governance.

Romney should be judged not on his Mormonism nor his approximation of Christian belief, but on whether he would wisely seek justice and serve the common good on issues of war, poverty, health care, immigration and the environment.

Some Christians worry that a Latter-day Saint in the White House would give a public relations boost to Mormonism. But if indeed Romney were elected and proved to be a president who pursued peace, served justice and remembered the poor, and if his presidency thereby lent prestige to Mormonism, we would have to say that the boost was in some sense deserved. That event too would have to be seen as part of the paradoxical way that God rules the political sphere.