

A Mormon president? The LDS difference: The LDS difference

by [Laurie F Maffly-Kipp](#) in the [August 21, 2007](#) issue

Shortly before the Southern Baptist Convention met in Salt Lake City in 1998, the SBC missions board distributed over 45,000 evangelistic kits titled “The Mormon Puzzle: Understanding and Witnessing to Latter-day Saints.” The kit included a video that depicted a typical Mormon family enjoying the weekly LDS ritual of “family home evening.” The video commentator noted that the Mormon family “could be the family across the street—wonderful, law-abiding people who adore their children, instilling values we all love and cherish.” But, the commentator continued, this family would be “lost for eternity” without theological direction. The message was that though Mormons may look clean and righteous on the outside, on the inside they are in the grip of dark forces; their actions mask the heresy within.

I recall those SBC materials when I read some media reports about Mitt Romney’s campaign for president. Photogenic, successful and dynamic, flanked by a large, close-knit family, Romney appears to be a viable candidate. But deep-seated suspicions remain about his affiliation with the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Journalists trace his political stances to his theological beliefs and his fund-raising to his church connections. A Romney presidency is not simply a vehicle for one man’s political aspirations; it is the opportunity to have “a Mormon in the White House.” The LDS Church, anxious to represent itself positively, has capitalized on the media attention to try to dispel old myths and to garner positive attention.

Mormonism has puzzled outside observers since Joseph Smith founded the faith in the 19th century. It has been called a cult, a Christian heresy and an American form of Islam. Conservative evangelicals such as Franklin Graham and Richard Land recently quizzed Romney to determine whether his beliefs square with their own. No less anxious are the queries posed by mainstream journalists in the *Wall Street Journal* and *Time* about practices such as polygamy and the wearing of temple undergarments.

In the September 2005 *Atlantic Monthly*, for example, Sridhar Pappu reported that he had asked Romney if he wore temple garments—and admitted he was uncomfortable asking the question. The issue of a candidate’s religion “should have died with the election of Jack Kennedy.” But Pappu did ask the question, along with another strange question that seemed to encode more than Pappu was willing to admit: “How Mormon are you?” Pappu never explained why undergarments might be pertinent to Romney’s candidacy—nor what constitutes being exceedingly Mormon. Mormonism remains mysterious to many Americans, according to Kenneth Woodward’s recent op-ed piece in the *New York Times*, which leads to the notion that, like John F. Kennedy, Romney should reassure us about his faith by unequivocally declaring that his primary loyalty is to the Constitution rather than to the LDS Church hierarchy.

But even if Romney were to explain his religious beliefs at length, I doubt that most people would feel more at ease. It is hard to imagine that anything Romney says on the subject would be taken at face value by the many Americans already predisposed to be suspicious of the LDS Church.

What does Mormonism suggest about the character of a potential president? This question is challenging principally because, as is the case with any religious tradition, there is not necessarily a direct correlation between Mormon beliefs or doctrines as enunciated by church leaders and individual practices. Just as one can’t tell very much about the behaviors of individual Catholics just by listening to the pronouncements of the pope or even reading passages of scripture, we cannot easily predict the behaviors of Mormons by examining particular teachings. Variety among Mormons is as common as in many other Christian traditions.

The LDS Church itself is only one of dozens of diverse Mormon groups that claim the Book of Mormon as authoritative. Although all share a common core of teachings, the groups range from some that could pass as Unitarian to the polygamist sect led by fundamentalist Warren Jeffs. The LDS Church, by far the largest Mormon communion, falls somewhere between these extremes. That said, it is possible to generalize about the Mormon gestalt for addressing three politically relevant issues: religious authority, moral values and church-state relations.

Religious authority: Latter-day Saints adhere to the teachings of a variety of scriptures: the Bible; the Book of Mormon, revealed to Joseph Smith and translated by him and understood to be the New World analogy to the Bible); the Doctrine and

Covenants (a compilation of revelations given to church leaders, mostly to Smith himself); and the Pearl of Great Price (a volume containing various Smith writings and his translations of numerous ancient texts that God revealed to him). These works function much as the Bible does for other Christians: as resources for faith, discipline and devotion that provide guidelines for living.

Mormons, however, do not believe that the canon is closed. The church's president and prophet can receive a direct revelation that, in theory, could be added to the Doctrine and Covenants. In fact, some faithful Mormons interpret all the teachings of top church leaders—in addresses given at General Conference and in published articles—as a form of authoritative scripture. For many Christians and many Americans, this possibility is troubling. What if the prophet has a revelation that contradicts U.S. law? How would individual Mormons—or an LDS elected public official—respond?

Damon Linker, writing in the *New Republic*, suggests that the possibility of new revelation makes for an inherently unstable religious identity. Classifying Mormons alongside latter-day Anabaptists, early Quaker zealots and other religious radicals, Linker invokes specters of wild-eyed followers who suddenly cast aside reason to heed the new revelation. Even though the church prophet has used this power to add new revelation only twice in more than a hundred years, the potential for sudden changes of course is seen as deeply suspect.

Yes, the prophet can receive revelation. But this power is couched within a set of concentric circles of revelation and authority: the prophet receives revelation for the church, bishops receive revelation pertaining to their wards (local churches), and fathers and mothers receive revelation relating to their families. Most important, Mormons—like Protestants—attach great importance to the agency of the individual believer, who is expected to pray and receive guidance for herself. This set of interconnected responsibilities makes for clear lines of authority, to be sure—few agencies are as efficient as a local Mormon ward in action—but it also means that leaders cannot, in theory, overstep the bounds of the authority bestowed on them by virtue of their office.

In practice, then, LDS religious authority is diffused and regulated in quite orderly ways; indeed, one might say that this flow is both more controlled than in many Protestant churches and more democratically distributed than in Roman Catholicism. Mormons are taught from a very young age that their purpose in life is to exercise

their own spiritual agency and to maintain a right relationship with God. The church hierarchy, of course, has a major role in facilitating that growth, but not the only role. Higher education is valued for both men and women, regardless of one's career path. Healthy living and moral values are extolled not simply as exercises in discipline, but as keys to individual progress. Considerable emphasis, in other words, is placed on the individual cultivation of personal agency, a fact that may help explain the resounding business success of someone like Mitt Romney.

Nor do LDS Church members in good standing bow to church officials at every point; the authority of many church teachings is, in fact, somewhat ambiguous. There are a number of incontrovertible teachings, of course (such as: Joseph Smith was a prophet; sex before marriage is forbidden), but these are surprisingly few in number. Many other decisions are left to the dictates of individual conscience. One need only ask 10 church members about whether Mormons are allowed to drink caffeinated soft drinks to encounter a wide range of interpretations.

Even more instructive may be the example set by Mitt Romney's father, George Romney. In 1964 the elder Romney came under fire from the right wing of the Republican Party for his progressive views on race. He also bumped up against LDS Church officials: LDS apostle Delbert Stapley warned Romney that a civil rights bill he favored was "vicious legislation" that contradicted God's "curse upon the negro." Romney did not back down from his support of equal rights, despite obvious political and ecclesiastical pressure. The stance he took did not compromise his standing as a faithful Mormon. In keeping with Mormon commitment to individual discernment, Stapley included in his letter to Romney the acknowledgment that "I cannot deny you the right of your position if it represents your true belief and feelings."

Such demonstrations of respect for the primacy of individual conscience and concomitant ambiguity over the absolute authority of church teachings are not unusual. It is not at all inevitable that Mitt Romney would feel the need to adhere to a particular religious line on political issues. His own changes in position on matters such as stem cell research and abortion in cases of rape or incest certainly fall within a range of belief that is tolerated, if not actively solicited, within the Mormon world.

Moral values: Evangelical Christians are worried about whether Romney will toe the line on "family values." Although Mormons today share many of the conservative right's political goals regarding women's roles, gay rights and abortion, they reach their stance by somewhat different means.

Take, for instance, the meaning of the family. LDS teaching on this point is entirely different from Protestant understandings of sin, salvation and human purpose. For Mormons, human beings were created by God as “spirit children” before the beginning of this mortal life. Spirits were not sinful but were, in a sense, undeveloped spiritually, and needed a means of maturation that would allow them to live in family with their Heavenly Father. Spirits are given bodies as a way of growing morally and moving toward salvation. In this respect, all human beings are brothers and sisters, literal children of God. Through this mortal passage, and through the lessons and challenges that only bodily activity can impart (raising children, performing sacramental functions in the temple), humans work their way toward salvation. Family takes on a new meaning when it is viewed as eternal in nature. People’s main task is to learn, develop and improve, and to help family members to do so as well.

This may all sound a bit abstract, but it can have profound implications for one’s orientation to family life. Rather than seeing children as sinners in need of chastisement and redemption, Mormons tend to see discipline as a strategy for teaching self-control. Mormons are, in this respect, heirs to a very liberal theological tradition. The language that the LDS Church uses to discuss child-rearing focuses less on preventing sin and avoiding temptation and more on personal cultivation: instructional topics such as “reasoning with children,” “building confidence” and “sharing sorrows” speak to a belief that human beings are not inherently predisposed to sin. Parents are instructed to “communicate compassion” to children and to build up their self-confidence and sense of autonomy. The Mormon approach to family values has imbibed contemporary psychological models of human development to a much greater extent than has conservative evangelicalism.

Family is critical to many Mormons also because the ultimate goal of progress is to keep the family unit intact, both here and in the hereafter. As much as individual agency is valued, so too is collective responsibility—within the immediate family and within the church as a whole.

For Mormons, salvation is a joint effort. It involves a measure of individual initiative, to be sure, as well as the taking of particular church sacraments (baptism and other temple ceremonies, such as the “sealing” of two people in marriage), but it is also a family endeavor, dependent on members helping one another and contributing to the common good. The highest goal of a faithful church member is to be sealed to one’s family for eternity.

The political issues now associated with “family values”—abortion, women’s roles and gay marriage—are significant for many Mormons, but for distinctive reasons. Abortion is wrong because it goes against the goal of enabling fellow spirits to enter the mortal world (although the equally important value of individual discernment complicates this; Mormon teaching on birth control, for instance, leaves a great deal of latitude for the couple’s choice). Gay marriage is not allowed because it counters the LDS belief that marriage is a sacred and eternal bond that is possible only between men and women. Whereas Protestants traditionally have interpreted marriage as a necessary way to quell the temptations of the flesh or as a natural union that will be dissolved in the afterlife, Mormons view marriage as an eternal estate.

Similarly, gender roles are not only earthly conveniences but are sacred offices with theological import. Officially, women are advised to stay at home with their children. But many Mormon women hold down jobs and advocate what might be termed feminist positions. The rhetoric of LDS women tends to focus less on the man as the head of the household and more on the partnership of men and women within marriage (Mitt Romney’s references to his wife, Ann, as his “life partner” are in keeping with LDS practices). A significant number of liberal Mormons fall within what Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, a Pulitzer Prize-winning Harvard historian and faithful LDS Church member, has called the “unsponsored sector” of Mormondom.

In recent years the LDS Church has emphasized its political commonalities with conservative Protestant and Catholic groups. Because of the distinctive direction from which Mormons approach many of these social questions, however, it is not certain that the political partnership with conservative evangelicals will last, or that it will extend beyond a few common touchstones. The Mormon emphasis on individual discernment always disrupts the attempt to reduce teachings to bumper-sticker slogans.

Romney, like the LDS Church itself, has emphasized a commitment to pro-life and family-values positions more vociferously in recent years. But it is possible that Mitt the candidate, like his father, could take a principled stance that would be at variance with official church teachings, or that the church itself would veer away from active endorsement of the family values cherished by the Protestant right. After all, it happened once before: When the practice of plural marriage was made public in the 1850s, Mormons interpreted it as an extension of Victorian family values so as to include more members, not as a refutation of those values.

Will evangelical Christians trust a Mormon to uphold the political values that the Christian right so cherishes? Despite Romney's attempts at détente, suspicion still runs very high, as the few evangelicals who have tried to engage in dialogue with LDS members have discovered. When Richard Mouw, the president of Fuller Seminary, made visible efforts to find common ground with Mormons several years ago, many staunch evangelicals were outraged by what they saw as his willingness to talk to the devil. Obviously, evangelicals are not all of one mind about dialogue with Mormons. But it is certain that many will remain suspicious of Romney's motives, despite any temporary allegiance of interests.

Church and state: Mormons exhibit a unique blend of American patriotism, rugged sectarian insularity, and a wariness toward secular authority borne of having experienced government persecution. Because of their theological emphasis on personal responsibility and the ethic of progress many Mormons—Mitt Romney among them— fit easily into a capitalist economic system and greatly value the freedoms afforded by the separation of church and state. But the collective memory of religious persecution and the very real fact of continuing suspicion and animosity toward the LDS Church color that patriotism in significant ways.

The early history of the church is kept alive in multiple venues, including within the pages of scriptural texts that outline the persecution Mormons encountered in Ohio, Missouri, Illinois and Utah. Just as Protestants in the colonial period reinvigorated memories of martyred Reformers, the Mormons, despite collective success, frame their collective identity as that of outsiders. And with good reason. The Mormons are the only religious community in this religiously free nation that has been the subject of an extermination order. In 1838 Governor Lilburn Boggs of Missouri called for Mormons to be exterminated or expelled from the state. (The order was officially rescinded, and apologies offered, in 1975.)

The potential conflict between the church and the U.S. government surfaced in the years-long trial in the U.S. Senate over the seating of Reed Smoot of Utah in 1903. Smoot, a Utah businessman and an apostle in the LDS Church, was accused by prominent Protestant politicians of belonging to a "lawless" organization. (The church had officially renounced polygamy as a practice in 1890, although polygamous relationships lingered into the next decade.) Smoot himself had only one wife and was, from all accounts, an upstanding citizen, but his connections to the LDS Church raised suspicions about his abilities and his loyalties. After four years, more than 100 witnesses, and thousands of transcript pages, Smoot was

seated in the Senate, where he served for 30 years (see *The Politics of Religious Identity: The Seating of Senator Reed Smoot, Mormon Apostle*, by Kathleen Flake).

If Mormon loyalty to the U.S. government has had a rocky and ambivalent past, Mormon commitment to the American continent has not. American geography holds a special place in Mormon sacred history. According to the Book of Mormon, it is both the place where Christ appeared after he witnessed to the apostles in Palestine and the site where he will return to build his kingdom in the last days. Further, the early history of Joseph Smith's martyrdom and the exile to Utah under Brigham Young have rendered sites such as Cumorah (New York), Nauvoo (Illinois) and Kirtland (Ohio) part of a sacred geography.

Yet the Mormons' commemoration of American sites does not link American government to a providential plan in the way that, say, Pat Robertson sees the American nation as the New Israel. For Mormons, the American government does not necessarily represent the New Israel; but the land itself is the future home of Zion.

This distinction is significant for what it suggests about the desire that a Mormon president may or may not have to employ the federal government as a sacred vehicle. Such a move, given the church's ambivalent relationship to a pluralistic, secular government—the nation is good and necessary, even worth fighting for, but it should never be confused with Zion or with the religious community—seems highly unlikely. And having a Mormon president certainly seems less dangerous than the perils represented by a born-again president who equates his decisions with God's will. Because of their own history of persecution Mormons, by and large, are far more committed to the protection of individual rights and wary of governmental intervention than are conservative evangelicals.

A diffused religious authority, an emphasis on personal agency and responsibility, and a dedicated but wary relationship to the government represent crucial elements of the Mormon gestalt. As I have suggested, however, Mormons are a varied lot, and it would be far too simplistic to think that one could cull specific political implications from a particular doctrine or religious practice. One need only recall the vast territory separating Harry Reid and Orrin Hatch to glimpse the divergent ways that political life can be interpreted and expressed among coreligionists.

Mitt Romney's political identity is even less clear. He is known now mostly for his ability to change his mind. While it is tempting to attribute his shift to the right to

the machinations of the LDS Church, and while the church itself has aligned itself more closely and vocally with traditional conservative values in the past few decades, it is difficult to see a clear line of influence from religious precept to political doctrine.

What seems most apparent from his tenure as the governor of Massachusetts and as head of Bain Capital, the investment firm he founded in Boston, is that Romney would bring a controlled and precise management style to the White House, a style patterned closely after the hierarchical patterns of life within the LDS Church. As a Mormon bishop and president of a church stake (a stake is analogous to a diocese), Romney has learned about leadership within a bureaucracy.

Recent months have seen the emergence of “Evangelicals for Mitt” as well as grudging shows of respect from figures such as James Dobson and Rush Limbaugh. Albert Mohler, president of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, who has firmly declared that Mormonism is antithetical to the Christian faith, has expressed conditional support for Romney. “There are circumstances in which I might well vote for Mitt Romney as president,” he said on National Public Radio. “In the right political context, there could be a lot of evangelicals voting for a Mormon candidate.” These are hardly sentiments of wholehearted support, but they suggest the viability of Romney’s candidacy and the possibility of a new era for Mormons in America.

In 1845, Mormons left the U.S. for the western territories so that they could practice their religion freely. America followed them, annexed the territories and once again persecuted them on religious grounds. Now, in the early 21st century, Mormons are part of the American mainstream as educators, bankers, businesspeople and politicians. Have we moved beyond the questions forced on Senator Reed Smoot? Or do we still interpret Mormon insularity and secrecy, so understandable given LDS history, as a mark of disloyalty, disrespect or ill intent? Mitt Romney’s candidacy is testing these boundaries once again.