

'Judeo-Christian values' provide Romney a link to GOP evangelicals

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Mitt Romney angered evangelicals during his first White House run in 2008 by blurring the theological lines between their faith and his Mormonism. Lurching in the other direction, he irked them again by scarcely mentioning religion at all during this year's GOP primaries.

But Romney has finally found some middle ground, evangelical leaders say, by sidelining theology and stressing the "Judeo-Christian values" that he shares with social conservatives.

"He's made it very clear not to gloss over the theological differences that his faith has with evangelicals," said Tony Perkins, president of the conservative Family Research Council in Washington. "As long as he talks about the shared values of our religious traditions, I think he's good."

Romney did exactly that during a September 9 *Meet the Press* interview, saying that religion inspired him to run for president—and making no mention of the word *Mormon*.

"The Judeo-Christian ethics that I was brought up with—the sense of obligation to one's fellow man, an absolute conviction that we are all sons and daughters of the same God and therefore in a human family—is one of the reasons I am doing what I'm doing," he said.

Conservative Christian leaders are taking the same approach, urging evangelicals to focus on Romney's policies and principles, not the particulars of his faith.

The GOP platform, including opposition to abortion and gay marriage, fits "squarely within the Judeo-Christian tradition," more than two dozen Christian notables wrote in a September 7 public letter congratulating Romney on the platform. The signers included activist Ralph Reed, evangelist Franklin Graham and Focus on the Family's president, Jim Daly.

Romney's standing among evangelicals has risen since the summer, according to a recent Pew Research Center poll, with 74 percent now saying they support him. Trailing in most national polls, the GOP nominee is counting on a huge turnout on the part of social conservatives, especially in swing states like Colorado, North Carolina and Virginia.

Mark DeMoss, a public relations executive who advises Romney's campaign on outreach to evangelicals, said the Judeo-Christian rhetoric sends the right signal to social conservatives. "It captures a common core set of values without getting tangled up in religious doctrine or theology," DeMoss said.

The term *Judeo-Christian* first gained currency in the United States during the 1920s, when American Christians sought to distinguish themselves from the fascist and frequently anti-Semitic Christian groups emerging across Europe. With the modern rise of the U.S. religious right, honoring the country's Judeo-Christian heritage became a battle cry for culture warriors who fought to keep the Ten Commandments in courthouses and sectarian prayers in public schools.

Just as the phrase allowed Catholics, Protestants and Jews to soft-pedal theological differences in favor of shared political causes, Romney and evangelical leaders are hoping to expand the big tent again, this time to embrace Mormons.

While many Mormons agree with conservative Christians on matters of public morality, the Judeo-Christian rhetoric is rarely mentioned within the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, said Patrick Mason, chair of Mormon studies at Claremont Graduate University in California.

"It's not heard all that often in the halls of a Mormon ward," said Mason. "I suspect that he's picking up cues from outside his Mormonism." But Mason noted that the Judeo-Christian term's implicit nostalgia for a pre-1960s America—before the rise of religious pluralism and church-state lawsuits—resonates with many Mormons.

DeMoss said Romney has consistently talked about Judeo-Christian values since launching his first White House run six years ago. For instance, Romney wrote in his 2010 book *No Apology* that Americans' "respect for life" is "the product of our Judeo-Christian heritage, which teaches that we are created in the image of God."

Romney also argued that "our Judeo-Christian heritage" is "central to America's rise to global leadership" in a May commencement speech at Liberty University. He also

noted that his Mormonism and the graduates' evangelicalism are "different faiths."

But some evangelicals remain reluctant to label Mormonism "Judeo-Christian." Southern Baptist official Richard Land, for example, once called Mormonism "the fourth Abrahamic religion" after Judaism, Christianity and Islam, all of which trace their roots to the Hebrew patriarch.

Ben Witherington, a professor of New Testament at Asbury Theological Seminary in Kentucky, said the Latter-day Saints doctrine of ongoing revelations makes the faith a "moving target."

"The real problem is that Mormonism is evolving. It's hard to pin down," said Witherington. He noted that the church renounced polygamy in the 1890s and opened its priesthood to blacks in 1978. "It's very hard to know what Romney means by 'Judeo-Christian values,'" Witherington said. "I have to be agnostic about it until he spells it out." —RNS