

Mormons in American Politics

A Conversation with Clayton Christensen

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Owens: I want to start with the question on most people's minds in the wake of last week's elections: Was Mitt Romney's religion an important—or perhaps even the most important—factor in his failure to secure the GOP nomination? To the extent that Republican voters did vote with regard to his religion, do you think they did so because of the religious faith or in spite of it?

Christensen: I think I could speak for most Mormons in that we were just stunned by the MSNBC poll that was reported in the *Wall Street Journal*. My memory is that 14% of Americans say they were strongly or modestly disinclined to vote for a woman, 19% were disinclined to vote for a black candidate and a whopping 50% said they wouldn't vote for a Mormon. I think we had viewed ourselves as having earned our way into the mainstream acceptance a little bit more than we possibly have. Romney's strategy really depended upon his ability to take certain states where, as it turned out, the evangelical bias was very strong. I think it caught all of us by surprise, and I think it probably caught Mitt by surprise.

Owens: What do you think this says about the future of the LDS Church in American politics? What kind of lessons can be learned? Would the outcome be different in the Democratic primaries?

Christensen: Christ said you should love your enemies and do good to people who spitefully use you. I think some of the behavior of the "Christian" right was really not very Christ-like—not the sort of thing that Christ would have done. But in some ways, I think maybe Mitt took a lot of the early volleys of ammunition that were shot at Mormons, and the next time around it may not be quite as vicious.

It is very interesting to me that, living in Massachusetts, it's almost politically incorrect to speak ill of someone because of their religion in what may be one of the most godless states in America. Yet those who have framed themselves as being God-fearing are the ones who were actually the least tolerant. Maybe a Democrat would've been more successful; Harry Reid certainly draws little flak from the Democrats.

Owens: Is it bigoted to reject a candidate for their religious beliefs, or is simply an allowable recognition of difference?

Christensen: When voting for someone, you want to predict what actions they will take once elected. I'm not sure that whether Mormons agree with mainstream Protestants on the nature of the Trinity is a very strong predictor of what actions a Mormon would take if elected. I think it's bigotry pure and simple; they're using a very inappropriate and unchristian litmus test against the LDS Church.

Owens: What about the argument that people should be able to vote however they want—even if such a vote is not what we might call a 'good' or 'just' vote?

Christensen: It's interesting. This has really been a cause of great introspection for many of us. If, however, the things that have been said about the Mormons were said about the Jews, for example, you have both the Anti-Defamation League and other mechanisms in place amongst journalists that simply will not tolerate that—and what a wonderful thing! That overt bigotry toward Jews—which was a fact of life 30 years ago—is just much less prevalent today, and the same goes for Catholics.

I think the Mormons—and I don't know if it's a problem or a virtue—have taken this situation in the way that Christ said one ought to take it on the Sermon on the Mount: do good to people who spitefully use you. I hope we can figure out how not to violate Christian behavior on the one hand, and yet be a lot more assertive about our faith on the other.

Owens:: In December 2007, Romney gave a speech entitled "Faith in America" at the George H.W. Bush Library in Texas. How successful do you think that speech was at addressing the questions Republican voters had about the role of Romney's Mormon faith in his future presidency?

Christensen: This might come back to what we were saying earlier, about what litmus test should the Republicans (and specifically Christian Republicans) have applied in choosing whom to vote for. I think the speech had a powerful influence on people who had an appropriate litmus test in their minds. They're trying to predict how's he going to find his positions on certain issues. The speech had the effect of conveying to them and reassuring them of the kind of person he is and the basic ethics and values that he has and that matter to him. But for those who are inclined to judge him on the basis of the doctrines of the LDS Church, it had no effect, and no speech probably could have had an effect on them.

Owens: As a member of the LDS Church, how do you envision your faith community dealing with the strains of anti-Mormonism that have leaped out in the campaign in the past year? What is the LDS community's best approach to addressing these anti-Mormon strains?

Christensen: I don't mean to disparage other Christian religions, but I think that Christian behavior occurs more often per capita in the Mormon church than any other church. One of the things Alan Wolfe has written about that I think is quite interesting is that perhaps Mormonism is more of an ethnicity than a religion. Mitt is Mormon like Ted Kennedy is Irish, rather than like Ted Kennedy is Catholic. If that's true, which it

probably is, it explains why Mormons have a greater propensity to befriend other Mormons, and stay within our church community.

If you could crawl inside the community and look at how people treat each other, what they do for each other, I really do think it's the most Christian community in the world. Again, there are Christian communities elsewhere, but this is really a hallmark of who we are as Mormons. People on the outside, however, don't see it. I think we've got to get a lot busier urging our members to run for the school board and just be much more active locally. If you're going to live an exemplary Christian life, it's as the Savior said, when your candle is on a hill, don't stick a bushel on it. I think we may have been a bit guilty of that in the past.

Owens: Mormons, as I understand it, have a special theological understanding of American exceptionalism that has raised some concerns about church-state issues. They seem to center around the fear that a Mormon politician might inappropriately conflate theological and political perspectives on the role of the United States in world events. Could you speak a bit about that issue?

Christensen: Well, as you know, our view is that a couple of hundred of years after Christ's apostles were killed, the church began to drift and compromise itself, in terms of practices and doctrines, to other philosophical forces in the Mediterranean. In response to this, they eventually articulated a set of creeds that defined orthodoxy, but the church continued to drift. The Protestant Reformation again tried to pull the church back, but as they pulled it back they continued to more firmly anchor themselves in some of those early creeds. Our view is that God needed to restore the original religion again in our day.

But just think about the maliciousness with which certain Protestant reforms were greeted in England. The very translation of the Bible into English was viewed as heresy and worthy of death. Therefore, if God planned to bring the full gospel back to the earth, the freedom of religion that existed in Europe simply wasn't free enough, because even modest reforms encountered vicious opposition. That is why we really do view the establishment of an ostensibly free country in North America as a prerequisite to restoring the original church. Even within the ostensible freedom in the United States, however, the opposition encountered is just vicious.

However, I don't think that our belief—that the key reason why the country was created here was so we could have religious freedom—I don't think it would translate in the mind of a thoughtful Mormon into any view that we as a country or as a people or a culture are somehow destined for world domination or supremacy or anything of that sort.

In fact, as we do our missionary service, regardless of how much you suffer, you always leave half your heart in your host country. And so I think, consequently, Mormons probably have less of an inclination to view America as somehow destined by God to dominate the world just because we have, I think, a better worldview.

Owens: In a way is this a sort of Jesuitical engagement with the culture that missionaries undertake?

Christensen: “Jesuitical” is a great comparison. You don’t get to know India on the 24th floor of the Mumbai Hilton. You get to know it by living with the people and working with them everyday.

Owens: Is there a meaningful distinction, then, that differentiates the LDS Church’s model of American exceptionalism from the more mainline Protestant/Evangelical model of American exceptionalism?

Christensen: Absolutely. If your understanding of God’s purpose in fostering the creation of this country was to permit religious freedom, then to have the view that we can’t tolerate somebody, whose religious views are different than ours, is inimical to what we believe the original purpose was for creating this country.

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