

Mitt Romney, Mormonism, and *Book of Mormon: The Musical*

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Beliefs are an important part of religion, but they are by no means its only — or often even its central — element. Mormonism also represents a community, a set of social practices, a set of moral strictures, a set of aesthetic responses, a sense of historical identity, a set of friendships, a series of covenants or commitments, in many cases a set of family relationships, a liturgy, an institutional structure, a set of overlapping intellectual discourses, and so on. A Latter-day Saint's commitment to Mormonism is based on far more than beliefs regarding individual points of theology. Rather, the Mormon's commitment will be a reaction to the totality of the human experience that constitutes Mormonism.

—Nathan Oman, Professor at William & Mary Law School¹

This morning's sermon is the first in a three-part series in the run up to Election Day. Next week, the sermon topic will be "The Obama Question: A Progressive Perspective" and the final part will be on November 4th about "The Democratic Process: The Fifth Principle." Let me reassure you from the outset that I have no intention of telling you whom you should vote for. And in future years with a different set of candidates, I well may not find it interesting or appropriate to spend three sermons preaching about the election. But this year I do find both President Obama and Governor Romney to be intriguing figures, albeit for different reasons.

Accordingly, my approach to talking about the two men will be quite different. But I'll leave my remarks about President Obama for next week. For now let me also say at the beginning that I do not think it would be helpful for me to take the stance of a pundit concerning

¹ Nathan B. Oman, "A Mormon Responds," a blog of *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (December 7, 2011), available at <http://chronicle.com/blogs/brainstorm/a-mormon-responds/41935>. Oman is responding to Michael Ruse, "Voting for a Mormon" (November 30, 2011), available at <https://chronicle.com/blogs/brainstorm/voting-for-a-mormon/41744>.

Mr. Romney. Although I have many strong opinions about Mr. Romney's politics, I'm more qualified to address one particular aspect about him: his Mormon faith.²

Of historical note, Mr. Romney is far from the first Mormon to run for president. In addition to his father, George Romney (1907-1995), who was a candidate for the Republican presidential nomination in 1968, Joseph Smith, Jr. (1805-1844), the founder of the Latter Day Saints movement, ran for president as an independent in 1844 in the same cycle in which the Whig candidate Henry Clay was defeated by the Democrat candidate James Polk, who became our nation's 11th president.

I bring up Joseph Smith, Jr.'s presidential run because it's important to remember that Smith's candidacy was brought to a tragic, premature halt, when he was killed by an angry mob in June of 1844. That tragic episode was far from the first or last example of prejudice against Mormons in this country. And I hope we can all agree that **reflexive anti-Mormonism is as equally repugnant as Anti-Semitism, Islamophobia, or any other form of religious bigotry.**³ That does not mean that these or any religion is beyond critique, but violence or uninformed prejudice is not the answer.

Along these lines, our highly religious nation needs to be reminded far more regularly that presidential candidates are not (or at least should not) be running running to be Pastor-in-Chief. Predating even the passage of the first amendment, Article VI, paragraph 3 of the U.S. Constitution states that, **"no religious test shall ever be required as a qualification to any office or public trust under the United States."** And almost a year ago in a debate for the Republican nomination for president, Mr. Romney made an important affirmation of that passage. Addressing a controversy making headlines at the time of some evangelical pastors calling Mormonism a cult, Mr. Romney said,

² For more on Romney's leadership in the Mormon church, see Jason Horowitz, "Mitt Romney, as a leader in Mormon church, became a master of many keys," *Washington Post* (August 19, 2012), available at http://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/mitt-romney-as-a-leader-in-mormon-church-became-a-master-of-many-keys/2012/08/19/7c8fe1bc-cf89-11e1-8e56-dffbfb1bd20_story.html.

³ For more, see Spencer Fluhrman, *A Peculiar People: Anti-Mormonism and the Making of Religion in Nineteenth-Century America*.

The founders of this country went to great length to make sure and even put in the Constitution, that we would not choose people who represent us in government based on their religion. That this would be a nation that recognizes and respected other faiths. That there's a plurality of faiths, where there was tolerance of other faiths. That's bedrock principle.... The concept that we select people based on the church or the synagogue they go to, I think is a very dangerous and enormous departure from the principles of our Constitution.⁴

I agree here with Mr. Romney, and although we can debate the extent to which this statement is merely one in a long line of cynical political calculations on his part, I'm grateful for sane, rational political statements wherever I can find them — because they are often far too rare.

That being said, I would like to say a few words about Mormonism more generally. First of all, the name “Mormonism” is not what “Mormons” have traditionally preferred to call themselves. It's like calling Muslims “Mohammedans”; it exposes an outsider's ignorance of a culture. The name Mormon or Mormonism comes from outsiders being most familiar with The Book of Mormon. And perhaps it also comes from the reticence of some Christians to use the preferred nomenclature of the “Church of *Jesus Christ* of Latter-day Saints.” For those individuals and groups that are unsure about the relationship of Mormonism to so-called “traditional Christianity,” the name Mormonism is often more palatable than using the name “Church of Jesus Christ” in referring to the religion founded by Joseph Smith.

Some of you may recall the Mormon Church's public media campaign in the lead up to the 2002 Winter Olympics in Salt Lake City, Utah in which Mitt Romney was president and CEO of the Olympic organizing committee. That media campaign, which came from the church not from the Olympics, *discouraged* the use of the terms Mormon and Mormonism and *encouraged* the use of the terms “Church of Jesus Christ,” “Latter-day Saints,” or “LDS” for short.

⁴ Elizabeth Tenety, “Mitt Romney takes on Mormon ‘cult’ comments and the religious test for office.” *The Washington Post* (October 19, 2011), available at http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/under-god/post/mitt-romney-takes-on-mormon-cult-comments-and-the-religious-test-for-office/2011/10/19/gIQADotWxL_blog.html.

More recently — likely due in no small part to Mr. Romney’s run for president — there has been an increasing trend of the LDS church seeking to *reclaim* the term Mormon. As reported in *The New York Times*, in 2009 the Mormon church contacted with two major advertising firms to help change its public image. Initial focus groups found that the most common words many Americans associated with Mormonism were “secretive,” “cultish,” “sexist,” “controlling,” “pushy,” and “anti-gay.”⁵ In response, Mormon leaders mounted a multimillion-dollar ad campaign to tell the personal stories of many diverse figures within Mormonism with the common slogan “I’m a Mormon.”⁶ Examples range from a Mormon Iraqi veteran to Mia B. Love, who is a black, a daughter of Haitian Immigrants, and Mayor of Saratoga Springs, Utah. (Mayor Love is also currently the 2012 Republican Party nominee for the U.S. House of Representatives in Utah's 2nd congressional district.) And although Mormons — from *Republican* presidential nominee Jon Huntsman to *conservative* political commentator Glenn Beck — are stereotypically associated with the Republican Party, it’s noteworthy that Harry Reid, the *Democratic* senate majority leader, is also a Mormon. For fans of science fiction, author Orson Scott Card is a Mormon — as is Stephenie Meyer, author of the *Twilight* series. Former NFL quarterback Steve Young is Mormon as well as the late Stephen Covey, author the bestselling book *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*. And for those who remember the 1970s, let’s not forget the musical group The Osmonds.

In considering the current position of Mormonism within American culture, one of the most insightful commentators I have found recently is Matthew Bowman, who was raised Mormon, but who also has a Ph.D. in American religious history from Georgetown University.⁷

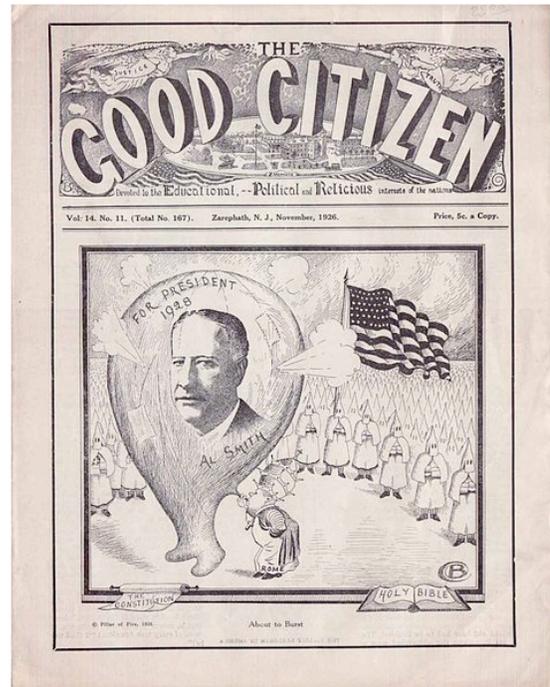
⁵ Laurie Goodstein, "Mormons' Ad Campaign May Play Out on the '12 Campaign Trail," *The New York Times* (November 17, 2011), available at <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/11/18/us/mormon-ad-campaign-seeks-to-improve-perceptions.html?pagewanted=all>.

⁶ “I’m a Mormon’ Advertising Campaign,” *The New York Times* (November 17, 2011), available at http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2011/11/18/us/20111118_mormonads.html

⁷ For an important critique of Bowman’s history of Mormonism, see Mark Silk, “Regarding Matthew Bowman’s Mormon Identity,” *Religion News Service* (June 12, 2012), available at <http://www.religionnews.com/blogs/mark-silk/matthew-bowman>. My view is that Bowman provides an important corrective to many media stories about Mormonism that lack the nuance of an insider’s direct experience.

Bowman wrote an article for *Time Magazine* recently in response to the question “Is This The Mormon Moment?”⁸ He writes that, “**A Mormon moment would mean a sudden instant in which America collectively grows up, reexamines its prejudices, learns more about a foreign faith, and realizes that its adherents are not so different after all.**”

Bowman pushes back against direct correlations between what Jack Kennedy did for Roman Catholicism in America and what Mitt Romney represents for Mormonism. Bowman argues that **a more fruitful comparison could be made between Mr. Romney’s candidacy and that of Al Smith.** In 1928, Smith, a three-term governor of New York, was the *first* Roman Catholic nominee for President of the United States. Herbert Hoover’s landslide defeat of Smith was due in no small part to a smear campaign that Smith’s religion would require him to be more obedient to the Roman Catholic hierarchy than to the U.S. Constitution. Fortunately, anti-Mormonism in this election cycle has not been as strong as some commentators predicted. And it is significant that the Romney-Ryan ticket represents the first time in U.S. History that there has been a major party ticket with *no*



November 1926 political cartoon: pro-Ku Klux Klan & against candidate Al Smith and the Pope.”

⁸ Matthew Bowman, “Is This The Mormon Moment? Can Romney do for Mormonism what John F. Kennedy did for Catholicism? Here's why the comparison is premature.” *Time Magazine* (September 27, 2012), available at <http://ideas.time.com/2012/09/27/is-this-the-mormon-moment/#ixzz29B0VZf5P>.

Protestant Christian.⁹ (As was emphasized at the recent vice-presidential debates, both Representative Ryan and Vice President Biden are Roman Catholic.)¹⁰

Let's briefly consider some demographics that buttress Bowman's point that Mr. Romney may be a closer parallel to Al Smith than Jack Kennedy. When Kennedy battled Nixon in 1960 for the presidency, approximately 25% of Americans were Roman Catholic: "most Americans had a Catholic neighbor, coworker or friend, Notre Dame football had rocketed to prominence, and the bishop Fulton Sheen was dispensing advice on his national TV talk show." **In contrast to 25% of U.S. citizens being Catholics during Kennedy's election, today only about 2% of**

⁹ Josh Levs, "Romney-Ryan ticket makes U.S. religious history," available at <http://religion.blogs.cnn.com/2012/08/14/romney-ryan-ticket-makes-u-s-religious-history>:

While some headlines declare Romney-Ryan ticket the first ever major party ticket without a Protestant, there may be an exception from the days of Lincoln. Lincoln himself "didn't belong to any church, wouldn't have described himself as a Protestant," Silk said. Lincoln did express a deep belief in a God. His first vice president, Hannibal Hamlin, was Protestant, according to adherents.com, which tracks the religious affiliations of presidents and vice presidents throughout U.S. history. In his second run, Lincoln took on Andrew Johnson as his number two. While some sources refer to Johnson having Baptist parents, he "is not known to have ever been an official member of any church," adherents.com says. Among Democrats, Kennedy; John Kerry, who is Catholic; and Michael Dukakis, who is Greek Orthodox, had running mates who were Protestant. Republican Presidents Herbert Hoover and Richard Nixon were Quakers, and Eisenhower was a Jehovah's Witness but converted to Presbyterianism after his inauguration, according to adherents.com. The Quaker tradition grew of Protestantism, though Quakers generally reject the Protestant label. Under that reading, one could argue that the Eisenhower-Nixon ticket of 1952, before Eisenhower's conversion, did not include a Protestant. While the two presidential tickets this year reflect a religious pluralism, it remains centered only on Christian denominations — setting aside the question of whether Mormonism fits a traditional definition of Christian. Just how much of a chance a candidate of another religion would have at the presidency is another question. Some believe that Joe Lieberman, the Democratic vice presidential nominee in 2000 who ran for the party's nomination in 2004, was not hampered by being Jewish.

Relatedly, there are also currently no Protestants on the United States Supreme Court, whose members are all either Catholic or Jewish.

¹⁰To date, the last Protestant to serve on the Supreme Court was John Paul Stevens, who retired in 2010. He was replaced by Elena Kagan, who is Jewish.

Americans are Mormon, and “most of them live along the Mormon corridor, from Idaho



south through Utah into Arizona.” The result is that Mormons continue to seem *unfamiliar* to many Americans — or in Bowman’s words, **“many Americans simply know no Mormons whom they can ask about their underwear.”** Driving down I-495, we may see the golden spires of the Washington D.C. LDS Temple, but most of us are likely much less familiar with what goes on inside those walls than inside the

walls of your average Roman Catholic cathedral.

Some of us here could perhaps even find ourselves saying, “Everything I know about Mormonism I learned from *Book of Mormon: The Musical*.” I will confess that I love the soundtrack to the show, and I’m looking forward to seeing it when it comes to the Kennedy Center this summer.¹¹ (As a fan of Broadway, satire, *South Park*, and most things religious, I may be this musical’s target audience. But I will warn you to avoid the show at all costs if you are easily offended.) We should be clear that the musical trades in stereotypes.

To address some real-life tensions, many Mormons understand themselves to be *Christian*, but many evangelical Christians would reject that assertion. One point of contention is that Mormons believe that God, whom they sometimes call “Heavenly Father,” has a flesh-and-bone body.¹² And in my favorite underreported Mormon belief, God is married. My secret hope is that “Heavenly Mother” is lying in wait for a feminist uprising in Mormonism. And in all seriousness, back in 1977 during the Mormon General Conference an organization called

¹¹ From the creators of the television show *South Park*, *Book of Mormon: The Musical* is the winner of nine 2011 Tony Awards including the Best Musical of the Year. For information on its summer 2013 run at The Kennedy Center, visit <http://www.kennedy-center/?event=TNTSE>.

¹² Laurie Goodstein, “The Theological Differences Behind Evangelical Unease With Romney,” (January 14, 2012), available at http://www.nytimes.com/2012/01/15/us/politics/evangelical-christians-unease-with-romney-is-theological.html?_r=1.

Mormons for the Equal Rights Amendment hired a plane to fly a banner over the Salt Lake City LDS Tabernacle that said, **“Mother in Heaven Supports the ERA.”**¹³

There’s a lot more that could be said about Mormon beliefs, but if I were pressed about what actually happened historically with the founding of Mormonism, I would probably agree *less* with the traditional account of Joseph Smith translating golden plates from God and agree *more* with scholars who speculate that **Smith was some type of “religious genius, capable of producing such a text from his own fiery imagination.”** Smith was only *twenty-four* when he **published The Book of Mormon.** And I’m not sure if there is any way of determining at this late date whether or not Smith *always* believed his own story — or merely came to believe his own story — that the text was from God. But **perhaps Stephen Colbert said it better: “Mormons believe Joseph Smith received golden plates from an angel on a hill, when everybody knows that Moses got stone tablets from a burning bush on a mountain!”**¹⁴

For me, the takeaway is **the invitation to take religion *seriously*, but not always *literally*.**¹⁵ And I’m hopeful that over time a historical-critical approach to Mormonism will produce an increasingly large group of socially-progressive, open-minded, “Heavenly Mother”-loving Mormons similar to the shift we have seen with other historically patriarchal, hierarchal, and oppressive religions that are increasingly forced to reckon with twenty-first century knowledge and experience. To this end, I was pleased to see this past week that The University of Virginia announced a new Chair of Mormon Studies in its Religion Department.¹⁶ I will be interested to see what an increasingly academically-informed Mormonism looks like.

But to return to the spoken meditation that you heard earlier, perhaps my biggest takeaway from learning more about Mormonism as a result of Mitt Romney’s candidacy is that

¹³ “*Mother in Heaven Supports ERA*” — see Matthew Bowman, *The Mormon People: The Making of an American Faith*, 234ff.

¹⁴ Stephen Colbert, “Yahweh or No Way - Mormons & God's Poll Numbers,” *The Colbert Report* (August 10, 2011), available at <http://www.colbertnation.com/the-colbert-report-videos/394360/august-10-2011/yaweh-or-no-way---mormons---god-s-poll-numbers>.

¹⁵ I owe the phrase “seriously, but not literally” to theologian Marcus Borg.

¹⁶ “U.Va. Creates Richard Lyman Bushman Chair of Mormon Studies,” available at <http://news.virginia.edu/content/uva-creates-richard-lyman-bushman-chair-mormon-studies>.

for many Mormons the traditional religious beliefs are much less important than the way of life that Mormonism represents. In a *New York Magazine* interview, Matt Bowman put it this way:

Mormonism isn't really a theological religion; it's about right practice rather than right belief. I thought the "Faith in America" speech that Romney gave during the 2008 campaign was intensely Mormon. He said over and over, look at the way I've lived my life, look at these good values I have, look at the family I have raised, look at how I have practiced my business. In that speech, he's saying the things that he believes Mormonism is all about. He's defending his religion.¹⁷

Here Bowman is emphasizing that for many Mormons, their religion is much more about "right practice" (what scholars call *orthopraxy*) than "right belief" (what scholars call *orthodoxy*). Notice what those two words have in common: the prefix *ortho*, which means "right" or "correct." Just as an *orthodontist* straightens or corrects your teeth to go the "right" way, *orthopraxy* or *orthodoxy* is about correcting or straightening your actions or beliefs — usually according to an allegedly unchanged historical standard.

If you're anything like me, you've probably found yourself occasionally in the middle of a debate with someone who is coming from an orthodox or orthoprax perspective. With rare exception these arguments quickly become predictable, repetitive, and tiresome. I sometimes think of it as similar to beating your head against a brick wall: the wall (of orthodoxy or orthopraxy) escapes unscathed, but your head starts to hurt a lot.

And even though I appreciate the importance of emphasizing that Mormonism is an *orthopraxy* more than an *orthodoxy*, I think we religious liberals often fail to appreciate the difference between liberal religion and either orthodoxy or orthopraxy. The critical difference is seen in that First Source of Unitarian Universalism: *direct experience*.¹⁸ **The turn to liberal**

¹⁷ Eric Benson, "Latter-Day Leader Matthew Bowman, author of *The Mormon People: The Making of an American Faith*, on how religion shapes Mitt Romney's candidacy" (January 29, 2012), available at <http://nymag.com/news/frank-rich/matthew-bowman-romney-2012-2/>

¹⁸ Gary Dorrien's magisterial, three-volume work, *The Making of American Liberal Theology*. Dorrien defines liberal theology as "based on reason and critically interpreted religious experience, not external authority" (1).

religion is about taking your personal experience in this world as equally valid — or as more important — than traditional sources that claim authority based on alleged historical precedent. As Unitarian Universalists sometimes like to say, **if your firsthand experience leads you to question traditional religious doctrines, authorities, or codes of behavior, you may be a UU and not know it!**

As an example of this liberalization, at the end of *The Book of Mormon: The Musical* — after all the satire, misadventures, and offensive jokes — there is arguably a quite substantive moral lesson that include a vision of a more liberal Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Earlier in the play there is a song called “I Believe” about the fixation that can sometimes be found in Mormonism about what happens to you and your family in the afterlife, in the “next world.” But at the end of *Book of Mormon: The Musical* you hear a shift from an other-worldly religion to a *this-worldly* religion when one of the actors evaluates all they’ve learned on their missionary misadventures and declares that he wants not to reject Mormonism, but to *reinterpret it* to be more relevant to modern times. He says, “We are still latter day saints, all of us. Even if we change some things, or we break the rules, or we have complete doubt that God exists. **We can still work together and make *this* our paradise planet.**” It’s just a Broadway musical, not a new revelation from the Mormon hierarchy, but I think we need to celebrate moves toward more open-minded religion wherever we find them.¹⁹ (I’d love, for instance, to have increasing numbers of Mormons willing to stand up in support of events like this afternoon’s People of Faith for Marriage Equality Rally.²⁰)

From the opposite direction, one of the questions I asked myself in preparation for this sermon is **“What would it look like if Mormonism were one of the sources of Unitarian**

¹⁹ Terry Tempest Williams, one of Mitt Romney’s cousins, wrote an article on “A Musical on My Faith” in *The Progressive* about her positive response to *The Book of Mormon: The Musical*, available at http://progressive.org/musical_on_my_faith.html.

²⁰ On the Marriage Equality Rally, see *The Frederick News-Post* (October 15): **“Frederick church, residents join to sing, talk about passing Question 6”** (available at <http://www.fredericknewspost.com/sections/news/display.htm?StoryID=141999#.UH412G125-G>). Relatedly, I published a letter to the editor in the *News-Post* on October 11: **“Minister says yes to same-sex marriage”** (http://www.fredericknewspost.com/sections/opinion/display_lte.htm?StoryID=141840#.UH4122125-F).

Universalism?” Arguably it is already included in the Third Source: “Wisdom from the world's religions which inspires us in our ethical and spiritual life.” And perhaps we UUs, who trend so strongly toward the freedom of the individual, have some lessons that we could learn from Mormons about building community, taking care of one another, and covenant commitments — perhaps even about tithing ten percent of your income!

Along these lines, the accusation is often made that many people are increasingly in echo chambers, listening mostly to news that reaffirms their preconceived notions. I'm curious if there is anything you have heard this morning about the historical, theological, and ethical context of contemporary Mormonism that has challenged your preconceived notions. I'll leave you with two questions: What wisdom might Unitarian Universalism draw from Mormonism? And what wisdom might there be in Mormonism for *you*?