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12-7-2007

December 7, 2007: Mitt Romney's Talk on Religion

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Title: Mitt Romney's Talk on Religion

Date: 2007-12-07T11:42:00.000-05:00

12/7/2007--Governor Mitt Romney gave a very confused speech about the relation of religion and public life yesterday. For starters, Romney refused to speak specifically of Mormon beliefs. To do so, he said, would amount to an unconstitutional religious test for office [for background on that test, see blog entry of November 30, 2007, below]. But Romney nevertheless did address, very specifically, his belief that "Jesus Christ is the Son of God and the Savior of mankind." Pardon me, but for Jews and Muslims, belief in Jesus sounds very much like the same kind of religious test.

Why did Romney speak of Christ this way? Romney's basic message in the speech was that every religion, including, by implication, the Mormon faith, "draws its adherents closer to God." This was supposed to put to rest questions about his faith in particular. Romney's problem, though, is with Christian voters and it is a problem an Orthodox Jew like Senator Joe Lieberman would not have. Christian voters would probably vote for a non-Christian, but pious, believer, on the ground that all religious believers share important commitments. This is what Romney was trying to suggest about himself. His problem is that some Christians view the Mormon faith as a Christian heresy. It is far harder to vote for a heretic than for a genuine believer in another faith. This is why Romney had to establish his Christian belief in a speech in which it had no place.

The other important inconsistency in the speech was the attack on secularists. Unlike JFK in 1960, Romney could not defuse the Mormon controversy by appealing to the separation of church and state in a way that suggested that religion is private and not a public matter. The Republican base to which Romney is trying to appeal does not believe that. They believe that public policy in some way should reflect religious values. Romney agrees with that. This was the gist of Romney's attack on secularists who want "to remove from the public domain any acknowledgment of God." They are wrong, says Romney, because religion does have a place in public life.

But, then, why doesn't a voter have to know what a candidate's religious commitments are? Those commitments might, by Romney's own acknowledgment, have a place in his policy making. And those religious commitments could not be known, in Romney's case, without explaining Mormon belief.

Romney could not explain Mormon belief, however, because, like other religions, those beliefs might sound odd at first. The middle of a campaign is just not the place for such education. I don't mean that the Mormon faith is odd—after all, Jews remove a portion of a male baby's male organ and some Christians believe they are drinking Christ's blood in the Eucharist—only that we become used to other such practices over time.

Romney is not the first to run afoul of the relation of religion and public life. Readers of this blog know that I called Mike Huckabee, whom I admire, a "typical religious hypocrite" last week for also trying to have it both ways. But Huckabee is in a much better position than Romney on this issue. I don't think this speech has accomplished what Romney needed it to do. Romney had 5 months to nail down the social conservative opposition to Mayor Giuliani. This speech certainly is not going to do what Romney failed to do in all that time.