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Mormonism's Al Smith moment?

Nathan B. Oman

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Let us suppose that Mitt Romney does not become the next president. What will this mean for the Mormons? There are about 5.7 million Latter-day Saints in America, which in a nation of more than 300 million makes us demographic chicken feed, but the question is important for what it reveals about the presidency and its relationship to American citizenship.

As a Latter-day Saint, I care deeply about whether a Mormon can be elected president. This is not because, as the anti-Mormon fringe suggests, my co-religionists and I want to impose a theocracy on the nation, but because so long as a Mormon cannot be elected president because he is Mormon. Rather, I care because so long as a Mormon cannot be elected president because he is Mormon, I am a second-class citizen in our culture, a member of a tribe disqualified from full political participation.

America has a paradoxical relationship to both tribalism and individualism. Unlike the European nations it sprang from, America insists that it is a creedal rather than a tribal entity. One becomes an American by accepting a set of core political ideals rather than by being adopted into any particular tribe. And yet the world - even the American world - has its tribes. For all our protestations of individualism, it seems that one's tribe must pass muster before one enjoys the luxury of being judged as an individual.

There are any number of reasons Romney might lose. He does not deduce policies and positions from first principles. Rather, he is a technocrat more comfortable with the nitty-gritty of running reforming institutions. He has basically conservative instincts, but he also probably regards abortion and other hot-button ideological markers as essentially distractions. After an eight-year surplus of conviction and deficit of competence, technocracy has its appeals, but there is something a little frightening about a complete ideological vacuum. After all, even technocrats have to be pointed in one direction or another. In short, if Romney loses there will be culprits to blame other than his Mormonism.

Yet Mormonism is a problem for Romney. Thirty percent of Americans tell pollsters that they would not vote for a Mormon candidate, and among the conservative Evangelicals who dominate many GOP primaries the hostility is even deeper. Nor is anti-Mormon prejudice confined to the theo-political hothouse of the religious right. Slate's Jacob Weisberg has argued that to be a believing Mormon is to demonstrate moral and intellectual incompetence. Likewise, the New Republic ran a story arguing that Mormon theology disqualifies Latter-day Saints for high office because there is nothing to keep a Mormon from accepting orders from the hierarchy in Salt Lake City. More recently, Lawrence O'Donnell of "West Wing" fame has ranted against the alleged racism, sexism and homophobia of Mormonism, insisting that no Mormon can run for president without first presenting a syllabus of errors on his faith and begging for forgiveness from right-thinking Americans.

It requires a touching belief in the political virtue of the left to imagine that Democrats will not play on such fears, should Romney get the GOP nod. While it will be impossible to judge exactly what role Mormonism played if Romney loses, it will also be impossible to deny that it had a significant impact. Romney's Texas speech was billed as a Kennedy moment, but if he loses, the correct parallel will be Al Smith.

Smith was the Democratic nominee who went down in defeat to Herbert Hoover. He was also the first Catholic to be a major presidential candidate, and the race saw a wave of anti-Catholicism. Smith was a successful politician. He was elected governor of New York four times in an era when the state was unquestioned *primus inter pares* in the Union. He also lost his bid when the Republican dominance of the 1920s was at its high point, and his opponent, Herbert Hoover, was the wonder kid of the age. There were lots of reasons why Al Smith lost in 1928. All of this is forgotten today.

Rather, until 1960 "Al Smith" stood for the rule that a Catholic could not be president. Catholics might be accepted into the New Deal coalition, but the coalition itself had to be led by a man whose tribal pedigree - Episcopalian and New York Dutch - was unquestionable. Indeed, the starkest evidence of what Al Smith's failure meant for Catholics is the fact that Kennedy had to travel to Texas 32 years later to put Protestant fears to rest. The evidence of Kennedy's success is that no Catholic candidate since 1960 has had to give a similar speech. If Romney loses, however, history suggests that the next national Mormon candidate will be forced to justify his tribe to the nation.

To be a full citizen means that one is eligible for full participation in public life. It doesn't mean, of course, that one will actually hold any particular office. But it does mean that one will be judged as an individual rather than as a member of a foreign tribe. By raising the possibility that Mormonism de facto disqualifies one for the presidency, the furor over Romney's religion has thrown the full citizenship of all Latter-day Saints into question. Ultimately, history suggests that the question can only be laid to rest by a Mormon being elected president. This fact does not provide a reason for electing Romney, but it does mean that, whether they like it or not, the stakes in this election are very high for Latter-day Saints. It is also a cautionary tale for members of any other marginal American tribe seeking the

privilege of being judged as an individual.

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