

Romney to walk fine line in Mormon speech

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By Jason Szep - Analysis

BOSTON (Reuters) - From baptism of the dead to a ban on coffee, Mormonism's doctrines are alien to many Americans and that is unlikely to change when Republican presidential candidate Mitt Romney gives a long-awaited speech on his faith this week, religious scholars say.

Thursday's address by the former Massachusetts governor, who would be the first Mormon president of the United States, could fuel more questions than answers about a faith many powerful evangelical Christian voters dismiss as a cult.

"I can't see him really making a kind of passionate defense of Mormonism. That's not going to win votes. On the other hand, to pretend he is an evangelical is not going to win. He is in a very awkward position," said Alan Wolfe, director of Boston College's Boisi Center for Religion and American Public Life.

Romney is unlikely to say religion will have no bearing on his decisions if he wins the November 2008 election or to stress the separation of church and state as John F. Kennedy did in 1960 to Texas Baptists while campaigning to become the country's first Roman Catholic president.

"Many of its evangelical voters who are crucial in the Republican Party's nominating process don't just want to know that you are religious but that you put religion at front and center," said Boyd Petersen, interim chairman of the Mormon studies program at Utah Valley State College.

"The one thing JFK did that was really important is he emphasized that religion should not be the litmus test for candidates. That's going to be harder for Romney."

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, as the sect based in Salt Lake City, Utah, is formally known, is the fourth-largest U.S. religion and one of the richest, with 12.9 million members globally and an estimated \$5 billion in annual revenue. More than half live outside the United States.

It bans alcohol, tobacco, tea and coffee. It maintains there is no eternal hell, the dead can be baptized and that God speaks through living apostles and prophets such as the church's current president, Gordon Hinckley.

Although Mormons revere Christ as their savior and consider themselves devout Christians, they reject the unified Trinity and teach that God has a body of flesh.

They believe the religion's founder, Joseph Smith, was a prophet instructed by God to restore the true church and that the Bible contains errors.

AVOIDING SPECIFICS

"With Mormonism, I think one of the problems he is going to face is that the more he talks about specifics, the more the differences are going to come into focus," said Petersen.

While healthcare, the Iraq war, immigration and the economy are dominant election themes, candidates from both parties make a point of highlighting their faith in a country where a recent Harris poll showed 82 percent of people believe in God.

But many voters know little about Mormons and are often skeptical of that faith's beliefs.

In a survey by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life in February, 30 percent of respondents said they would be less likely to back a Mormon for president, while 46 percent in a Gallup poll said they had an unfavorable opinion of Mormons.

Campaigning in New Hampshire, Romney said his speech in Texas would not echo Kennedy's but focus on "our common heritage, the founding fathers, the faith which they had in a creator -- not a specific religion."

"I am certainly not a spokesman for my faith," Romney said on Monday. "We have had presidents who were Quakers, Unitarians, of course a Catholic president," he added. "It shows that we do not choose our presidents based on their denomination but instead upon their vision and their values."

A former bishop in his church, Romney often skates around questions about his faith, at times adopting the language of evangelicals by calling Jesus his "personal savior". In a debate, he described the Bible as the "word of God".

While that may shore up support among evangelicals who share many of Romney's conservative views on issues ranging from abortion to gay marriage, he also has to be careful not to offend Mormons who are big donors to his campaign.

Some Mormons were angered when Romney criticized polygamy, which the church banned in 1890, by calling the once-common Mormon practice "bizarre" even though his own great-grandfather had five wives and great-great-grandfather had a dozen.

In a failed 1994 bid to unseat Sen. Edward Kennedy of Massachusetts, Romney also faced questions about his faith, especially over Mormonism's past policy of barring blacks from leadership roles.

He responded by calling the 1978 lifting of a ban on black priests "one of the most emotional and happy days of my life."

Romney is the fifth Mormon to seek the White House. His father, former Michigan governor George Romney, ran in 1968 and the church's founder, Joseph Smith, was shot to death by a mob during his 1844 presidential campaign.

Francis Beckwith, associate director of the J.M. Dawson Institute of Church-State Studies at Baylor University, said voters may not end up with a much clearer understanding of the Mormon faith.

"One of the big issues the church is facing as it has grown and its members have become more prominent is how much of the theology do you reveal without surprising people," he said.

(Additional reporting by Josh Rogers in New Hampshire; Editing by John O'Callaghan)